ROACHES IN THE ATTIC 0
NON-RETRIEVAL
RAYMOND TOWERS

Roaches In The Attic

About the series: For the first time in recorded history, humanity has developed the technology to travel among the stars. The unrestricted exploration of space begins, only for our first wave of pioneers to discover abruptly and brutally that we are not alone in the cosmos. It will be up to the Space Marines not only to counter this new threat from far, far way, but also to prevent these bizarre new enemies, the Roaches, from finding Earth and bringing their unforgiving brand of destruction down on all of us.

About this title: For rookie Spaceman Douglas, the mission sounded easy enough. Take the squad of Marines out, discover why the outpost had gone offline, and bring them back home in one piece. Now, they are stranded on an alien planet, fighting for their lives against the greatest threat humanity has ever seen. Genre: Science Fiction. Rating: MEDIUM controversy.

Roaches In The Attic 0
Non-Retrieval

Raymond Towers

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(This novella contains the original version of the Non-Retrieval story. The story has been modified significantly in the later novels that make up the Roaches In The Attic Series. For more information, please refer to other titles in this series.)

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Roaches

Like a plague they descended, dropping into the midst of the unprepared and frightened soldiers as dozens of bouncing, pummeling cannonballs. Plasma fire whines across the battlefield as skittish fingers pump on smoothly gliding triggers, hitting the alien creatures' hard shells and deflecting the lethal beams in all directions, including back among our own troops. Howls of pain erupt from the mouths of mortally wounded men, only slightly eclipsed by the orders from their commanding officers.

Through it all, the balled-up insects roll toward where the concentration of soldiers is at its thickest. Then, displaying an uncanny and unnerving sense of synchronicity, the tumbling balls halt all at once and begin to unfurl. Their trademark clicking commences, a combination of sharp screeches and disconcerting snaps that causes involuntary winces and fuels an instinct of panic in some of the young Marines. This noise serves to briefly stun the troops, as half a dozen jet-black limbs telescope from the rising monstrous bodies. Their two thick and thorny legs lift them to nearly an equal height as the men. Two pairs of arms simultaneously uncurl and clasp together, as if the creatures are uttering some dark and sinister prayer. For a brief moment, a split second, it seems as if nothing is happening, until the first shock waves hit.

Death comes quickly to the innermost circle of gawking and gaping spectators, as invisible beams of intense heat immediately incinerate or explode their bodies. The after-effects of the assaults consume a second row of the tightly grouped soldiers, bursting their hair and clothes into flames, melting their hard polymer weapons in their grips. A high percentage of the front line infantry, whether through panic or injury, or even simple confusion, is rendered ineffective…

(Partial notes recovered during the aftermath of the War on Betelren Six, Space Corps Outpost 02-27. The author's identity is not known. The date is Tuesday, January 20, 2060. This is the date of first contact.)

#####

Chapter 1

Platoon 10-20's moving out.
Platoon 10-20's moving out.
Opposition had best watch out.
Opposition had best watch out.
Left, right.
Left, right.
Left, right.
Left, right.
We find ourselves so far from home.
We find ourselves so far from home.
On a purple rock, we're all alone.
On a purple rock, we're all alone.
Left, right.
Left, right.
Left, right.
Left, right.
As usual, we'll rise to the task.
As usual, we'll rise to the task.
Platoon 10-20's gonna kick some ass!
Platoon 10-20's gonna kick some ass!
Ten, ten!
Twenty, twenty!
Ten, ten!
Twenty, twenty!

(A typical cadence.)

Date: Thursday, January 27, 2061
Location: Puller Spaceport, MDRS (Marine Division Recruit Station)
San Diego, California

Once I'd rotated the co-pilot's chair by one hundred and eighty degrees, I scanned across the innards of the Unilink Space Transport, designated number One-Twenty-Six. The Space Marines were filing in through the small vessel's hatch, some impatient, others somber, rarely speaking. In their usual, professional manner they filled in the seats starting from the furthest back and moving forward. The seating consisted of two short, gray metal benches running along either side of the transport, with heavy-duty black nylon seat straps for each occupant, and an overhead spot for them to snap their weapons into.

Dutifully, each of the hard-nosed soldiers secured the weapons into their spots, in this case the newer Spitfire v7 plasma rifles, before removing their helmets and laying them on their laps. They reached to their sides, bringing up the adjustable ends of their security belts. With a loud snap, they clicked their belts locked.

Space Infantry, Space Marines, their cammies and weapons I'd seen many times before, perhaps too many times already, during the ongoing campaign against the nefarious Roaches. On this particular mission, however, it was the bizarre coloration of the soldiers' uniforms that held my attention. The squad of twelve, plus their fearsome and well-known commanding officer, all wore standard issue, camouflage pattern fatigues. In contrast to the tan or green shades I was used to seeing, however, the articles of clothing before me had been dyed in an uncommon combination of gray and black.

The outside of our vessel had undergone a similar metamorphosis, with the addition of an even more bizarre color, dark purple. The lower parts of the ship were painted in an irregular black pattern to represent grass, the middle and top half in various shades of the same gray and black as the soldier's cammies, and the very top had purple streaks on the roof and upper edges to mimic hanging leaves. Even with the quick-dry techniques the Space Corps contractors had used, we'd still been waiting a few hours for the paint to dry.

Upon viewing the odd hues for the first time, the ship's Senior Spaceman, Royce Tennard, immediately and affectionately nicknamed the vessel the 'Purple Haze.' He said he'd named it after some obscure twentieth century rock music, but I'd never heard of the song personally. Who the hell was Jimmy Hendricks, anyway?

With both the Marines and the Unilink Transport so curiously disguised, I thought that the landscape of our target planet, Lesenia, must be a very strange one indeed.

"I hope we do run into some o' them black devils." A young ebony soldier beamed. I immediately thought of the term B.A.M., or Broad Ass Marine, that I'd heard somewhere or other. The woman aimed an invisible weapon across the transport and slowly squeezed its trigger. "Boo-yeah!"

On the opposite bench, a freckled blond man pretended he'd been shot. He grabbed at his heart, closed his eyes and lolled his head to one side. As a final gesture of his fatality, he stuck his tongue out. This man's name was Finn, I would come to find out very shortly.

"I hear that." The heavy shouldered Marine sitting next to the black woman nodded. "Some filthy Roaches are about to get themselves served!"

"Are you finished sightseeing, Douglas?" An impatient voice grated at my ears. I swiveled my seat around to face the front of the transport, turning my head toward the Senior Spaceman's chair, where the pudgy pilot was seated and giving me an irritated look.

Tennard leaned in close, since the cockpit was of open design and sound carried well against the mainly metal interior of the transport. He was near enough for me to get a good look at his balding brown hair, thick brown mustache and fleshy jowls. "Just listen to those turkeys. They actually think we're going to see some action on this trip. So Lesenia hasn't communicated with CP-1 (Command Post One) in thirty-six Earth hours, big fucking deal. Things like that happen all the time at these new outposts.

"CP-1 panics every time and they send in the cavalry, and all for what? We go halfway across the universe to an outpost in butt-fuck Egypt, only to find that some relay burned out or they need

to realign their satellites one more time. Then we get to stand by and watch as the outpost reboots its computer system and voila! The problem is solved. Try explaining that scenario to Renquist's lynch mob. You'd think they all jerk off to their rifles, except for that dark-skinned woman. I bet she uses her rifle as a dildo."

As if on cue, the stern voice of Staff Sergeant James Renquist cracked through the vessel's bowels like a hard whip. "Davis, Knotts, secure your traps."

"Yes, Staff Sergeant." The two Marines complied. "Oorah!"

The grim-looking man slammed the transport's hatch shut, hard enough that I winced even though I saw it coming. Next, he pressed the small control pad that would secure the hatch and give it an airtight seal.

Since the two bench seats were completely full, Renquist unlatched an auxiliary seat that folded out from the wall. The problem with doing this was that Renquist would be seated directly behind Tennard. The Marine's proximity would severely curtail the Senior Spaceman's ability to colorfully express himself.

"Fuck." Tennard mumbled.

"We're all in." Renquist growled.

Tennard glanced over at me. "Douglas, why don't you take care of the safety check?"

I nodded, retrieving the metal clipboard from its narrow slot to my side. The list on it was a hastily printed out copy naming the Marines we were about to transport.

I left the semi-comfort of my padded seat and strode down the center aisle. Luckily, it was a good four feet wide and far enough away from the passengers that I didn't end up stepping on anybody's short boots. I began checking the names off the list, after reading the stencil writing on the soldier's front left pockets.

The Marines all looked to be in their twenties, except for the Staff Sergeant whom I guessed to be between thirty-five and forty. They were all part of one of the better-known outfits in the Space Marines, Platoon Ten-Twenty. From what I'd heard each Marine was specifically chosen for the mission by Renquist. Most of the soldiers looked well seasoned by war, with weathered faces creased by hard lines. I wondered just how much action these young soldiers had seen.

I took in their duds too, contrasting them to my dark blue Spaceman uniform. Cold eyes and dark countenances met mine. I became unnerved by the scrutiny, lowering my head and focusing my full attention on the clipboard. Although part of the safety check included making sure that all seat belts were in place and secure, I skipped over that detail and went back to my chair.

"All passengers accounted for, sir." I told Tennard.

"Good." The Spaceman nodded, standing and leaning forward over the control panel with a cloth towel in his hand. He impatiently removed a smudge on the corner of the wide, rectangular Plasti-Shield window. Afterward, he tossed the towel into its holding bin and dumped his big butt back in his chair. "I've decided to shake things up a little, Douglas. You've seen me take this bird out enough times, haven't you? How would you like to do it on your own today?"

Whether the question emerged as the result of actually advancing my training, or just plain laziness on the part of the Senior Spaceman, was a moot point. I nearly jumped out of my seat. "I'd love to!"

"Don't get all worked up about it." Tennard pointed a warning finger at me. "You have to remember to do everything in its proper sequence, and you have to make sure each step is done

correctly before you proceed with the next one. Exactly the way I've been showing you for the last couple of months."

"Right." I nodded.

"Now, have you informed our target Link of our impending arrival?"

"I have. Five minutes ago."

"Have they given us a confirmation code?"

"Yes."

"Have you double-checked the landing coordinates we were given to make sure they match up with the coordinates on our master list?"

"Coordinates have been confirmed."

"So far, so good." Tennard scrutinized the information on his side of the dashboard. His end was a mirror of mine, except for the override control cluster which was nearly centered between us, but leaning a little toward him. This cluster would allow Tennard to quickly take control of the situation if, heaven forbid, some mishap were to occur. The hefty man reached for his security belt. "Let's get ourselves buckled in and you can continue with the fire-up procedure." He tilted his chair by about ninety degrees to one side. "Sergeant Renquist, the Purple Haze is about to depart."

Renquist shifted his gaze toward the back end of the transport. "You heard the man, jarheads! We are Pulsing out! Dempsey, what in the name of all that's holy are you sitting on? Will you stop squirming around so much?"

I heard a Marine bark back, "Sorry, sir!"

I'll tell you right now, I was nervous. I took a deep breath before I glanced over at Tennard. Once he'd given me his official nod of approval, I pressed the first of the four Pulse-Magnifier buttons. Next to the button was a small LED bar. I watched closely as it filled from red to green. Once it finished up a read-out next to it showed one hundred percent. I pressed the second button and repeated the same sequence on down until all four Magnifiers were fully loaded. The Pulse Activate button came next. I hovered my finger over the little black square and once again looked to Tennard for confirmation.

He watched my actions intently. "Go ahead."

This is it, I thought. I brought my index finger down on the button. Almost immediately, the Purple Haze began to quiver. The first Pulse took place, giving me the impression that the transport's walls were contracting inward. The second Pulse followed shortly after, repeating the effect of the first, while adding a bright, white sheen to everything in sight. The third Pulse arrived several seconds later than the others, bringing with it a blinding white glare that made me wince. This Pulse proved to be strong enough to send us into outer space.

To someone observing from the deck around us, it would have appeared as if a great ball of light had enveloped the Purple Haze, briefly glowing like a miniature sun, then fading away a second later. Once the glare was gone, so too would be Unilink Transport Number 126. To the shuttle's occupants, however, the ride was disappointingly short. The Link System had been perfected to the point where the journey through the stars was about as exciting as a trip to the post office.

As quickly as it had appeared, the glare subsided. I opened my eyes to stare out the lone Plasti-Shield window and verified that our trip through the stars had been a success. The first

words to greet me were ‘Link Outpost: 01-77,’ stenciled in large, black, block letters high up on a plain concrete wall.

“Yes!” I ejaculated. The word had already spilled out and all over the inside of the shuttle before I realized how loud I’d said it.

“Remember protocol, Douglas.” Tennard reminded me.

Eagerly, I scanned around the small dock, becoming a little disappointed that no human beings were around to witness my very first hands-on Pulse jump. I did see a Navigation Droid, however, about four feet tall and shaped like a cylinder with three short, stiff legs, rolling out to greet us. The Nav-Droid’s large display panel flashed the word ‘OKAY’ on it. At the same time, it emitted short bursts of light toward our transport’s receptor unit. The ship’s computer converted the electronic signals into readable data.

“Target link has been attained.” I read off my display. “Nav-Droid reports a perfect link-up, with no structural or radiation damage to either our vessel or to the outpost, or to the general surface of the planet we just landed on.”

“Well done, Douglas, theatrics notwithstanding.” Tennard more or less congratulated me. The portly man busied himself with the navigational charts on his screen. “Inform me as soon as the Pulse Magnifiers are ready again.”

What a bitter turd, I grumbled in my head. I glanced over at the first Magnifier button, noting that it had gone down to sixty-two percent, right before I clicked it on. It would take a minute or two before all four Magnifiers were loaded again. While I waited, I leaned forward to peer out as far as I could past the edges of the window. “Where is everybody?”

Tennard didn’t even bother to turn his head away from his screen. “You need to pay better attention to your surroundings, Douglas. It’s after hours. Everything was done through the computer system.”

The curt answer made me feel stupid.

I looked on my computer screen, discovering that it was half past three hundred hours in, where were we again, oh, in Dengas time. Next jump, I thought, I’ll just keep my mouth shut. Was I the only person on the transport that was excited about traveling through the galaxy? I caught the blink of the instrument panel telling me that Magnifier One was full. I clicked for Number Two to begin loading.

After this, I shifted my attention toward my computer screen and switched over to the navigation charts. Our next stop was Kuatica. I clicked on the name, prompting the computer to take me to the planet’s information page. After a quick scan through the entry, I learned that Kuatica was a planet whose surface was covered nearly ninety percent under ice. Only a short strip of land had escaped this eternal winter, right along the planet’s equator. Even this area was prone to temperatures of up to minus one hundred and twenty-eight degrees Celsius. (-262 F)

The idea of a planet covered in ice was fascinating to me. I resisted the urge to reveal this to the Senior Spaceman, who had the personal demeanor of an ice cube that had accidentally gotten buried in the freezer, and soured behind the veggies and meat. Instead, I pursed my lips and returned my focus to the Magnifiers. A few minutes later, I said, “Pulse Magnifiers are fully replenished, sir.”

“You may proceed in ten seconds.” Tennard said flatly. He shifted his chair back to face our live cargo. “We’ll be making our second jump in just a few seconds. It should be just as smooth as our first.”

A few grunts reached the front of the vessel, but not much else.

Steadier than the first time, I pressed the Pulse Activate button. The Pulses came again, as before, with each one stronger than the one previous. This time, it took us four tries to Pulse out.

Our arrival on Outpost 03-24 was as mundane as the previous one. A sentry garbed from head to toe in extra thick clothing stepped in front of the transport and waved a friendly arm in our direction. I waved back.

The usual model Nav-Droid rolled forward to stand beside this person. Oddly enough, the droid was also covered in thick cloth, all the way around except for its big, bright display. The droid started spouting out its short series of digital flashes.

“Another textbook landing.” I said, more or less bragging, as the incoming data was translated on my screen. “The Nav-Droid reports that their main Pulse Generator is down for routine maintenance. Their back-up system is up and running in its place.”

To manually confirm this, the sentry held up a lone finger, and right after gave us a thumb down. The person then held up two digits and gave the thumbs up. I held out an open hand to signal that we understood.

Tennard swung his chair around to relay this to the senior Marine sitting right behind him. “The main power grid here is down, but their secondary system is available. It’ll take us a few minutes longer than usual to get back up to full power.”

“Whatever it takes.” Renquist bluntly replied.

“It’s not like we have a choice.” One of the other Marines muttered.

“Yeah, we do.” Another man countered. “We can get off right here. I heard they have a seven-day (convenience) store right around the corner. Hey, Spacemen, open up the hatch so we can jump out and head for the nearest beer garden!”

“Shut up, Brick.” Somebody said.

Tennard rolled his eyes at me, before he started switching the Pulse Magnifiers to draw from the auxiliary system instead of the primary. It was a brief task, and the man was soon sighing and leaning back in his seat. Wordlessly, Tennard stared out through the rectangular window, with his hands clasped over his stout stomach. For half a second, I wondered what the big man might be thinking, until I happened to glance at the temperature reading for the dock. I converted it into the more familiar Fahrenheit.

“It’s almost minus one hundred degrees out there, inside the dock!” I blurted out, but if I was expecting some kind of reaction from Tennard I sure didn’t get it.

The burly man kept staring through the Plasti-Shield with an irritated look in his face, as if he’d rather be anywhere else in the universe than packed into a tin can with a baker’s dozen unruly Marines. The sentry on duty, I noticed, was now tinkering with the engine on a small forklift. I wondered how that guy could stand working in such extreme cold. He must have been freezing balls out there!

Since there wasn't much else to do but wait, I swiveled my chair around and glanced back into the cargo section. Staff Sergeant Renquist, I noticed, was busy giving a last minute briefing to his personnel.

"According to our higher-ups," The hard man said. "Outpost 04-91 stopped responding to transmissions at nineteen hundred hours, approximately one day and a half ago Earth Standard. The usual culprits turn out to be minor technical glitches, but…" He cast a quick, sharp glance in Tennard's direction. "You never know until you actually get there."

"We'd just started our seventy-two hours (three days off.)." One of the more broad shouldered of the bunch shook his head. This was Knotts, if I remembered right. "It just doesn't seem fair, Staff Sergeant. We were finally getting some time off before being whisked out to Twenty-Nine Stumps again (Marine Division Combat Center at Twenty Nine Palms, California), and Boom! We're on another fucking mission. We didn't even have time to make a pit stop at Tia-Juana to pick up some hookers!"

"Well, let's just hope somebody forgot to switch their transmitter on." Another Marine commented dryly. "And that it isn't anything more serious than that."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Staff Sergeant." The ebony woman, Davis, raised her hand to high-five Knotts sitting beside her. After a loud smack, she added, "Me and Numb-Nuts here, and the rest of our posse, we can take care of anything that so much as blinks at us the wrong way."

"Yut, yut!" Somebody seconded.

"It's Knotts." Her fellow soldier corrected. "Stop calling me Numb-Nuts, please."

A few suppressed chuckles were heard.

"So, we're getting sent out to the farthest end of the freaking galaxy, and all for what?" The soldier I recognized as Dempsey spoke up. "Just 'cause some purple branch fell off a stupid tree, and knocked some egghead on his ass hard enough that he forgot to check in with CP-1?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." Renquist explained. "The outpost equipment was already verified as working properly. The problem is we haven't gotten any word from them in a day and a half. They haven't responded to CP-1's inquiry calls, either. Besides that, there are other security measures available to them."

"They've got a couple of those, right?" A new face asked. "Security measures?"

Renquist nodded. "If the main hardware did happen to go down, there are two recently instituted options available. One is the Pulse System itself. A coded message can easily be transmitted in a relatively low powered Pulse. Also, every outpost is now equipped with a tracking beacon that can emit a distress call. Any nearby space-faring vessels or satellites have the ability to pick this signal up. As of the time we boarded this transport, neither one of these security measures has been activated."

"So what does CP-1 think happened out there?" This question came from a Hispanic soldier, sporting short-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. "You've got what, maybe ten survey people unaccounted for. Half of them are eggheads with at least basic weapons training, and the other half is full time infantry, right? If it was a typical survey mission, they had wide range, energy trace scanners and perimeter motion sensors. They've got the works out there. How could anything big enough to take out that many people and defenses, just sneak up on the outpost and not give anyone a minute or two to send out a distress call?"

“Rubalcava, that’s just it.” Renquist answered. “Command Post One doesn’t know what happened. That’s why they assigned us to go out there and find out. Our M.I.A. count is much higher than that. We’ve got just over thirty people currently on Lesenia, plus the three transports and all the equipment they took out there with them.”

“Thirty people couldn’t send out one simple message?” Rubalcava asked. “Why so many bodies out there, anyway?”

“The brass had big plans for that neck of the woods, up until about thirty-six hours ago.” Renquist informed them. “Lesenia is an ideal location. Its atmospheric conditions are perfectly suited for humans, it has no intelligent cultures to speak of and the few reports regarding the larger wildlife indicate that it should domesticate easily. The planet is positioned in a good central location and that makes it an ideal jumping point for the unexplored solar systems nearby. The original plan was to build a full-scale regiment headquarters on that rock and to pop out new outposts from there as the need arises.”

Ominously, the entire transport got quiet. The Marines began to look at one another.

“I’ll say it, because I know everybody here is thinking about it.” Dempsey sounded agitated. “Betelren Six.”

“Four words, shit-brick.” Davis snarled. “Shut. The fuck. Up.”

“The last word is,” Renquist went on. “That the outpost personnel had just started sending out satellites to investigate the rocks around them and bring back samples.”

“Maybe an Explorer Drone brought back something that wiped them out.” One Marine suggested.

“Or maybe something changed on Lesenia.” Rubalcava theorized. “Maybe the temperature suddenly dropped or the air quality changed. Maybe it happened too fast for them to deal with it.”

“Maybe they ate something they didn’t agree with.” Knotts shrugged.

“Or maybe, they didn’t agree with something that ate them.” Someone joked, causing a short ripple of laughter from the others.

“We’re assuming that the planet’s atmosphere will not be a problem.” Renquist said. “Explorer Drones thoroughly tested the air quality and soil well before any human being set foot on Lesenia. In the highly unlikely event that the atmosphere has somehow changed, the monitors mounted on the outside of this transport will warn us about it. In that case, we’ll simply Pulse back to the nearest outpost and report our findings to CP-1.”

“That’s even worse than being yanked off leave!” Knotts complained. “We’ll be sitting at an outpost playing with our balls until somebody rounds up a bunch of bio-dorks, and then we’ll still end up going to Lesenia as their escorts!”

“We are in The Big Suck.” The Marine named Brickwell commented.

The Senior Spaceman started tapping impatiently on my side of the instrument panel. “Pay attention, Douglas.”

I turned my seat around, realizing that enough energy had been drawn into the first Magnifier for me to move on to the next one. As I started loading the next, I tried to keep an ear on the conversation going on behind me.

“Hey, Brick,” Someone said. “You haven’t been out to Lesenia lately, have you? I heard Brickwell once wiped out an entire colony with one of his gas attacks. Maybe he snuffed the entire outpost after one too many bean burritos!”

"Oh, stuff it up your…"

"Next one, Douglas." Tennard tried to jerk me back to attention, but I was still watching the read-out.

I clicked on the third Magnifier, watching it fill up as quickly as the second. I never did understand why sometimes one Magnifier would take forever to load up, while the rest only took a fraction of the time. The fourth took less than a minute.

"Are we ready now, Douglas?" Tennard was trying to irritate me now, and I have to admit it was working pretty good. The Senior Spaceman spun around in his chair, as if he couldn't wait to get the mission over and the Marines off his transport. "System's up. We'll be Pulsing out in about five seconds." To me, he said, "Go ahead, Douglas."

I waited the whole five seconds, before I pushed the magic button.

Once again, the transport began to Pulse. The lone sentry turned to watch us leave. I waved at him in between white flashes. After a mere seven Pulses, we finally left the hangar.

Unexpectedly, the transport dipped hard enough to feel like the sudden descent on a roller coaster. Right after, it began rocking forcefully from side to side, or in deep plunges like a wild bronco.

My first thought was that I'd done something wrong; that I'd done something out of sequence or that I had somehow screwed up the coordinates. When I turned to look at my superior, I could see that Tennard was finally registering some kind of emotion on his face. Unfortunately, it was a mask of fear that stared back at me.

"Something's wrong!" Tennard cried out. "This pathway was rated as being low risk!" He tried to keep his head still to scan his computer screen. "This can't be! The coordinates have changed midway through the jump!" Futilely, the man glanced out the window. We were both shocked to see that the white glare of the Pulse was still evident outside, enveloping the entire transport. "We're caught in flux!"

With my head rattling from the jarring motions, I looked down at my own set of coordinates, only to see the digits flicker before my eyes. "The coordinates just changed again! Our new landing site is several hundred miles away from our original target!"

"What?" Tennard asked in disbelief. He verified this on his own terminal. "These numbers are random! Enter our original coordinates in manually while I try to stabilize us!"

Without answering, I slapped down the override button, clearing the landing coordinates from the screen. I started punching in the sequence to Lesenia's outpost again. Before I could finish, the transport bucked forward. Only my tightly secured restraining belt kept me from smashing my face into the bank of controls.

"Yeeehaaa!" One of the Marines behind me yelled. "This beats the state rodeo!"

The vessel suddenly pitched upward. My flailing arms and legs caused my chair to swing over to one side, before I got a good grip on the control panel and stopped myself. I watched two unlucky Marines roll off their seats and down the center aisle. Brutally, they got knocked into the legs of their fellow soldiers and against the hard parts of the transport benches. The Marines regained their bearings right away and recovered their helmets. With the help of their fellows they made it back to their seats.

"Freaking Sunday drivers!" One of them complained.

“Strap yourselves in tighter next time, girls.” Renquist admonished them with his grating barks. “I hear the main feature is about to begin!”

Still clasping the control panel with both hands, I forced my chair to face forward with my waist. As fast as I could manage, I entered the correct landing coordinates, only to see the screen replace them with its own numbers again. I nearly screamed out loud from frustration.

Tennard witnessed the unexpected change as well. “The computer won’t let us use our original site!” He said, flailing his arms out as he lurched sideways in conjunction with the rolling transport. Tennard’s restraint pulled tight against his middle. “Uuunnn!” He grimaced. “We’ve got to use whatever the computer will allow! Lock in to the next set of numbers that’s anywhere near the outpost, while I try to level us out again!”

In an even sharper angle than before, the front of the Purple Haze pitched upwards and I found myself pinned back hard on my seat. I strained forward to reach the terminal controls, but even with my fingertips stretched to their limits, I was still several inches too short. Straining against his security belt, Tennard smashed at the stabilizers with his fist, causing the back of the vessel to buck up once, nearly putting us level. The next time he punched those same buttons, the back of the ship jolted upward. Behind me I could hear a helmet bouncing around on the floor.

“Marine!” Renquist’s voice cut through the chaos like a chainsaw. “Retrieve your head cover, NOW!”

“Yessir!” A muffled voice answered him.

Tennard pounded at the stabilizer controls, while at the same time cursing them for not responding immediately. When they finally did comply, it was totally unexpected and felt as if someone had slammed on the brakes. The force threw us both forward. This time the seat restraint tore into my gut as well.

The soldier who had gone to retrieve his helmet had been hopelessly caught by surprise. With nothing to hold him in place, the poor guy flew forward. Cruelly, he slammed into the rear portion of my seat, which was hard metal covered by a thin layer of foam and fabric. The impact was a loud and sickening crack, like the splintering of ice. It was so revolting that I couldn’t even bring myself to look back and see if he was all right.

“Finn!” Someone called out. “Finn!”

“Marine, get on your feet!” Renquist ordered. “Get on your feet now!”

“He’s not getting up, sir!” Dempsey sounded squeamish.

“I can see that, you moron!”

Tennard finally managed to decrease some of the rocking and rolling. This gave me the break I needed. “Coordinates locked on, sir!”

The Staff Sergeant’s loud voice boomed out again. “Neelson! Come over here and check on Finn! Everybody else, stay put! That includes you, Dempsey!”

“Sorry, sir!”

“Stand by, Douglas!” The Senior Spaceman shouted at me. “I’m going to try and get us out of flux!”

I moved my hands away from the instruments and tightly gripped the sides of my seat. The transport started vibrating so violently it seemed as if it was about to shake apart.

“Finn’s life signs are down!” Neelson called out, from right behind my chair.

“Well, don’t just gawk at him,!” Renquist ordered. “Help me roll him back and strap him down with the floor belts!”

“Yes, sir!”

The vessel shuddered so hard it made my brain hurt. Through chattering teeth I asked, “What’s happening?”

“The outpost computer is trying to send us somewhere else!” Tennard growled. “Prepare to send all auxiliary power to the Pulse Magnifiers, on the count of three!”

I switched to the correct screen and quickly set this up.

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

“Go!”

Simultaneously, Tennard pushed the manual override and brought the locked-on coordinates back onto the screen. I channeled all non-essential electrical power to further boost the waning energy in the Magnifiers. The moment this was done, Tennard punched the Pulse Activate button.

The entire inside of our small ship went black, while outside the bright glow of the Pulse still engulfed us. A moment later, the Pulse faded. We were left to stare through the Plasti-Shield at an endless wood of thick, gray tree trunks with large, drooping purple leaves, and pale blue sky past them. The Purple Haze appeared to be lying awkwardly on a slope and tilted some forty-five degrees up at the highest point.

“How could the outpost override our manual commands?” I asked, hurriedly unbuckling my seat restraint. I half-climbed onto my newly angled seat and began examining the various readings and instruments.

“Maybe someone at the outpost became aware of our distress and tried to redirect the ship back to the original landing site.” Tennard surmised. “I don’t know! For a second, it felt as if the two computers, the one here on the ship and the one at the outpost, were trying to send us in different directions. The way the coordinates were jumping around like that, we could have been in flux forever, or worse, we could have run out of energy and blinked out of existence altogether. I’m just glad we’re still in one piece right now.”

“Do you think it was Roaches?” I asked.

“It can’t be.” Tennard shook his head, finally managing to undo his own restraint. He took in a deep breath before he continued. “The Link System is supposed to be beyond their technology. Besides, they’ve never been spotted in this side of the galaxy before. Activate the auto-check circuit. Let’s see if anything got damaged during our little joyride through hell.”

I did. Within a few seconds the system beeped its completion.

Tennard was already staring at his screen, propping his legs against his seat to keep his big frame aloft. “Life support systems are still at full power, thank heaven. All of our auxiliary systems are way down, between ten and twenty percent. That’s to be expected after such a huge power draw. Interior lights and electronics are either at zero or almost there. The Magnifiers are all at zero.” He shook his head. “A couple more seconds in flux and we would be nothing but memories right now.”

“How’s the air quality outside?” Renquist came up behind us. He braced himself on the back of Tennard’s seat, to keep from sliding down into the dark bowels of the ship.

“Give me a second to reroute some power.” Tennard said, getting it done quickly. “According to the sensors, air quality and environmental conditions are precisely as expected, all well within safety standards.”

“Did you hear that, jarheads?” Renquist’s voice boomed through the darkness like a freight liner’s foghorn. “It’s party time! Secure your brain buckets, unfasten your seat belts and grab your weapons, all in that exact sequence. Proceed towards the hatch in an orderly fashion and prepare to exit. Menden, un-secure that hatch! It’s time for us to evac this sardine can!”

Glimpses of the shuffling Marines were visible, barely, through the tiny rays of sunlight that managed to invade the inside of the transport.

“Sir, the hatch is not operational!” Menden called out, punching repeatedly and fruitlessly at the unlocking pad.

“You might consider manual overriding it, you imbecile.” Renquist spat back. “Davis, Knotts, you two will be bringing up the rear. Bring Finn outside with the rest of us.”

With a loud wrench, Menden forced the lever that kept the hatch in place. We could hear the air seals being released a second later. A couple of awkward kicks dislodged the hatch from its thick rubber surrounds and finally the hatch jerked open and allowed a long stream of pale daylight to enter the dark vehicle.

Menden slid aside, going back to his seat to grab the remainder of his gear. The rest of the Marines used whatever handholds they could grab onto and filed into a short line that started at the hatch. One by one they made their exit. There was a gruesomely uncomfortable moment as Davis and Knotts tried to maneuver themselves while carrying the dead body of Finn. Menden helped solve this problem by bracing Knotts’ back until the two sturdy Marines got out with the corpse. Right behind Menden at the hatch was Renquist, who paused and glared back at the two Spacemen.

“Some technical glitch.” He cursed, before he too was gone.

The Senior Spaceman ignored the comment, choosing instead to focus his attention on the vessel’s barely functioning control panel. “That’s strange. The comm system doesn’t want to power up at all.”

“Short circuit?” I asked, rummaging through my head for the location of the repair gear the transport carried. “Blown fuse relay, maybe?”

“I don’t think it’s either one.” Tennard scratched at his fuzzy gourd. “The auto-check circuit reported that everything is in A-One condition. The display is showing that the comm is at fourteen percent. I’ve checked it two different ways, so the number has to be accurate. The problem is that every time I try to route more power from one of the other systems, it doesn’t go through. The power goes back to wherever I drew it from. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“So, the last jump might have screwed up the comm system?”

“But why only the comm system?” Tennard frowned at me. “Watch this.” He poked at some buttons. The transport’s lights flickered on, although only at around fifty percent of their normal brightness. “I can turn on the lights, and I can even start up the rag cleaner if I wanted to, but I can’t call out.”

“Wait, what’s our minimum power requirement for calling out?” I thought back, suddenly feeling anxious all over again. “It’s twenty-five percent, right? That means we can’t even call the outpost to tell them where we ended up?”

Tennard nodded. “We can only get incoming messages, but at the moment it doesn’t sound as if the outpost is all that concerned about what happened to us.” He filled his cheeks up with air and blew it out as he changed the display on his computer. “What’s worse is we ended up some fifty miles north and, uh, slightly east of our original landing site. With all the random numbers that kept flashing by on the screen, I doubt that either the outpost at Kuatica or the one here on Lesenia ever got our final coordinates.”

“So we’re lost out here, just like the scientists from the outpost?”

Tennard glanced into the bowels of the ship, as the lights suddenly began to glow brighter. He turned back to the control panel and shifted screens again. “Oh, good! Outside power is being channeled into our system. That means the Pulse Generator here on the planet is still operational. I think the outpost might be trying to rescue us, finally! Let me reroute all this extra power away from the lights and over to the Magnifiers.”

“The outpost is okay?” I wondered. You don’t know how much that relieved me!

“It certainly appears so.” Tennard nodded. He tried the comm again and made a quick grimace. “Still no luck on getting through to them. Here’s what we’ll do: I’ll keep watch on the Magnifiers and you start working on a Long Reach Radio. We’ve got to get some kind of communication going with the outpost.”

I went through a mental inventory of the extra equipment in the cargo holds. “We should have enough parts to make at least five of those things.”

“The power is flowing nicely into the Magnifiers.” Tennard noticed, sounding as comforted as I felt. “See if you can raise anyone in the outpost.”

I excused myself and clambered over toward the hatch. The eerily toned landscape, with its vegetation of gray trees and dark purple leaves, and the knee-high grasses in varying shades of black, was nothing short of spectacular. If there was one thing I regretted, it was not having the time to enjoy it more.

Chapter 2

I jumped out of the transport, noticing that the Marines had all taken their packs out of the cargo holds, which were set up similar to the holds of travel buses back on Earth. I took a moment to close and secure all the doors, before stepping over to the bay reserved for extra field equipment. A few other equipment cases were stored in there, containing short-wave radios, general-purpose tools and the like. Finally, I located the case marked LRR (Long Reach Radios). It was a pretty heavy case. I found that out the second I'd hauled it into my arms. I closed the storage door and latched it shut before I walked off with the single case.

"I've got more power on the way now." Tennard's voice drifted out. "I'll be out in a second to give you a hand."

"Affirmative." I called back.

Menden stood guard just a few feet away from the hatch, shifting uneasily. The rest of the Marines had retreated to a spot some thirty feet further away from the vessel. It looked as if they were preparing for a long march. I groaned inside when I thought of the fifty miles between the outpost and our position.

"I heard that." Menden said. "About getting power from the outpost. We shouldn't be stranded out here too much longer, right?"

"Not much longer." I reassured him, pretending the equipment case wasn't as heavy as it really was. I glanced around for a good flat spot to set the case, since I knew I was going to have to put the radio together regardless. At the same time, I didn't want to sit next to the crazy Marines either.

By now, you might have guessed that Spacemen and MAD (Marine Division of Space Corps) did not always get along. The rivalry was even worse between MAD and SID (Space Infantry Division of Space Corps). I tended to stay out those kinds of things, because in the end we're all on the same side, right? At least, I thought we were. I'd barely lowered the heavy burden to the ground when I heard a commotion start up from the Purple Haze.

"Staff Sergeant!" Menden shouted.

I spun around to observe the familiar white glow weave itself around the tilted transport and peaking much more rapidly than it should have. The lone Pulse got so bright and hot it caused the panicky Menden to run for cover. I had to lower my head, wince my eyes and cover my face all at the same time. The damned vessel looked as if it was about to go supernova. A second later, the bright flare dwindled away into nothingness. The sudden burst of light had taken the Unilink Transport away with it.

Knotts invaded my peripheral vision, his Spitfire rifle grasped and ready. "What the hell just happened?"

"Those flyboys showed their true colors." The disruptive Davis stepped up next to him. "Yellow."

"Naw, look." Some unknown soldier pointed at me. "One of them got left behind."

"You're in The Suck now." Brickwell commented in my direction. "Right along with the rest of us."

“Spaceman Douglas, ree-port!” Renquist commanded. The stern man had been hurrying toward the spot where the transport had stood, but now diverted his steps toward me.

I was as flabbergasted as the rest of them. “I’m not sure what happened.”

“See, that goofy Spaceman knew we were all goners.” Dempsey whined. “He lit out the first chance he got!”

A lot of big, ugly Marines were coming at me now, as I straightened up to try and defend my superior. “Tennard couldn’t have done that. We were still in the process of replenishing the Pulse Magnifiers. He wouldn’t have Pulsed out before they were ready. Maybe the outpost sent out a single, high powered Pulse to retrieve the transport.”

“Can the outpost even do that, Staff Sergeant?” Dempsey asked.

“Sure they can, you shit-bird.” Renquist snapped. “That’s how Space Corps gets its vessels back when they’re out exploring new planets like this one. They just don’t do it very often because it’s such a drag on the Pulse Generators.”

“I heard the Spaceman saying it was too much power.” Mended added. “Why would they need to use an emergency Pulse when the outpost was sending the transport plenty of energy to begin with?”

Renquist’s sharp features sharpened even more. “Douglas, what are the chances that whoever sent that emergency Pulse locked in to our present location?”

“One hundred percent.” I answered. “As soon as Tennard punched in the request for more power the outpost computer, or whoever it was, would have locked onto these coordinates. They know exactly where we are now.”

“We have to press on to the nearest defensible position.” Renquist concluded. “We can’t afford to take any chances by staying here. Not if the Roaches or anything else might pop up at any second, with all of us just standing around like a bunch of school girls waiting to be asked to the dance.” He glanced down at the closed case on the ground. “What’s in that container?”

“LRR parts.” I replied. “I was about to put together a radio.”

“You’ll get that chance, but not here.” Renquist said, before he turned to address the rest of the Marines. “Two columns, ten feet apart, weapons at the ready. Davis, Knotts, bring Finn’s body with you. Douglas, fall in to the rear. Rubalcava, give me a heading.”

“Finn’s backpack, sir?” Somebody asked.

“Give it to Douglas.” Renquist said.

“Staff Sergeant,” Rubalcava called out, staring into the small screen of his GPS (Global Positioning System) Mapper. “We’ve got a wide clearing about half a click to the east. We’ve still got trees all around it, but we should be able to pick up anything moving toward us from this direction.”

“All right, jarheads, you’ve got the word.” Renquist said. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

A backpack dropped on the ground beside me. Just from the sound of it I knew it was going to be heavy. Right after, I glanced at the sturdy Marines around me. Some of these guys could bench-press three hundred pounds, or so I’d heard. And here I was doing my reps at a third of that weight. I looked at a seventy pound backpack and what was probably a sixty pound equipment case sitting a couple of feet away from it. FUBAR (Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition), I thought.

I hoisted the pack on my shoulders. I didn't even have time to adjust the straps on it before the small squad was positioned to march. Clumsily, I crouched and nabbed the equipment case. After this, I took my spot at the end of the line, right across from the two Marines holding a dead body aloft. In my thoughts I started cursing Marine Division, Space Corps and all interstellar species currently posing a threat to humanity.

The group started moving, so fast I was having trouble keeping up even with the corpse. Its head and body lolled about slightly as the two big Marines carried it over the uneven terrain.

Less than ten minutes later, we left the cover of the vegetation and crossed into the clearing, only to continue on into the shadow of a new set of trees. These were bushier than the previous bunch. Their purple leaves were much smaller and more abundant, so much that many of them had dropped to clutter up the ground. The few visible patches of dirt we trudged over were colored in an elephant shade of gray. My biceps strained from the weight of the stupid case. I was doing my best to not give away my discomfort to any of the soldiers.

"Radio silence unless it's an absolute emergency." Renquist barked. "We don't want any unfriendlies picking up our chatter. Brickwell, Dobson, you will scout a quarter click to the east of our position and keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Davis, Knotts, you will do the same to the west. Head out on the double."

"Staff Sergeant," Brickwell muttered. "This whole planet is out of the ordinary. The leaves out here are fucking purple."

A few of the others chuckled.

I thought Renquist would pitch a bitch over being interrupted, but he didn't. He just went on as if he'd grown accustomed to hearing such things from his subordinates.

"Menden, find yourself a good tree to climb and make like a squirrel." The hard man continued barking. "Neelson, Strawberry, you two are on fire-watch, on opposite ends of our position, twenty yards out. As for the rest of you, Dempsey, Mason and Zachs will be digging out a resting place for our fallen brother Finn. Rubalcava, whenever you're ready, feel free to give me your own odd perspective on this cluster-fuck we've just gotten ourselves dropped into. Spaceman Douglas, you will be stripping off your uniform and replacing it with Finn's."

I intended to set my case on the ground, but my biceps were throbbing enough to get my fingers to rebel. The case slipped out of my hands. It made such a loud clamor upon bouncing on the leaves you would have thought I was a little kid throwing a tantrum.

A lot of Marines turned to gaze at me. Their faces included that of Staff Sergeant Renquist and his cruel, predatory eyes. "Is there a problem here, Douglas?"

"No, sir." I said, quickly thinking up what one of his people might say. "I was just in a hurry to get going, sir."

This seemed to satisfy the man, as he turned back toward his squad. "Let's get moving, jarheads! We've got daylight burning out here!"

Wordlessly, I stepped over to where Finn's body lay. The man's neck was twisted to one side, his open eyes staring in my direction as if prematurely accusing me for the unholy act I was about to commit on his body. I glanced at some of the other men, but they were too busy removing Insta-Shovels from their backpacks to notice how uneasy I was.

Knowing I couldn't put the gruesome task off any longer, I took off my backpack, which was really Finn's backpack, and knelt down by the dead man. I reached out to touch his chest, worried

that he might suddenly wake up and start grabbing at my arms to stop me. Appallingly, Finn's body was still warm to the touch. I didn't dare look back at the others in case anyone was watching me, especially the hard-nosed Staff Sergeant. I knew Renquist wouldn't hesitate to jump down my throat if he saw me having any misgivings about undressing a corpse.

Instead, I took the deepest breaths my lungs would allow, exhaled and embarked on my assigned duty. I unbuttoned the dead man's field shirt and yanked it off the long, limp and flopping arms. The belt I undid quickly, after which I began pulling and tugging fruitlessly at the camouflage pants, before dumbly realizing that the dead soldier's boots were keeping them on.

"Any bright ideas, Rubalcava?" Renquist vocalized from a short distance away.

"I can't figure this place out." The young Marine answered. "I read this planet's description as soon as I heard we were coming out here. We're supposed to have grazing animals, birds and insects all over the place, but where the hell are they? We haven't seen or heard anything except the bunch of us ever since we exited the transport."

"You know, I think you're right." Renquist commented. This was followed by a quick huff of irritation. "There's never a local zoologist around when you need one!"

By this time, I'd set Finn's outer clothing and boots into a neat pile a few feet from his body. I began taking off my own clothing and making a new pile next to the first one. As I did this, I noticed that the Marines had already marked off a suitably sized area to serve as the dead man's grave. They were efficiently loosening up the dirt.

One of them, a big, square-jawed man, stepped back to wipe a line of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He glanced at me standing there in my underwear. This big, unruly Marine had thick limbs and a strong five o'clock shadow. The lettering on his cammie blouse read: Mason. It felt a little awkward, as the guy didn't get back to work right away but just stood there watching me.

In my most casual voice, I asked, "Why exactly am I doing this?"

Mason smiled. "Take a wild guess, pretty boy."

Beside Mason, the Marine called Zachs, short for Zachary, snickered.

Not thinking I was going to get any further response, and feeling more visually violated by the second, I grabbed Finn's pants and started putting them on.

"Have a good look around, flyboy." Mason spoke out anyway. "You've got your gray tree trunks and your black grass, and you've got purple leaves all over the floor."

"So?" I asked.

"Now take a look at your cute little uniform." Mason continued. He was still ogling me like a lecher. "You tell me what doesn't belong."

I glanced at the pile of clothes I'd just taken off. They were a rich shade of blue. Against the strange background of the forest, I realized, my uniform would stick out like a sore thumb. I looked back at Mason.

"See, you're not as stupid as you look." The soldier concluded with an unnerving wink, before returning to his shoveling.

Feeling more than a little disturbed, I got dressed in a hurry. As I finished, I ran my eyes across Finn's dead body one last time. That's when I noticed the thin, metal bead necklace secured around his throat. I crouched down, not really wanting to pull on the necklace, but I did it anyway. I soon had the soldier's dog tags in my fingers. They were simple, flat metal tags, with

the bearer's last name and Space Corps ID number engraved on them, as well as a tiny holographic image of the man's face.

Tradition held that if a soldier were killed on the field of battle, and if his body could not be brought back to the soldier's home planet, his dog tags would be removed and eventually they'd be returned to his surviving family. The pair of small items meant so much, and at the same time, I thought, they meant so very little.

"What should I do with these?"

Mason was already making a face before he glanced over at me, but his countenance softened once he saw what I held in my hand. Seriously, he said, "You can't lose those tags. No matter what else happens, you can't lose them."

I stood up to stick them in a pocket.

"Not there." Mason shook his head. "They might fall out and get lost out here forever, in this godforsaken shit-hole of a planet. You can't take any chances with our tags. You have to wear them around your neck until you can hand them to somebody who knows what to do with them."

Quietly, I secured them around my neck.

"And if something happens to me," Mason continued. "Make sure you get mine too. Make sure they get back home to my family."

I opened my mouth to say something, but Renquist's loud voice interrupted me.

"Spaceman Douglas, I'd like a word with you." The Staff Sergeant called out.

Renquist stepped up before me. He stared at the dead man between us so long I eventually started staring at him myself.

"Finn was a good man. Hell of a way to go." He said, finally. "I would like for you to put your uniform on this man's body, before we place him into the ground. He'd look proper being buried that way."

I nodded halfheartedly but tried not to show it. It had been bad enough to strip the dead man, only for me turn around and dress him up again. I decided to start with the pants this time, expecting Renquist to stride off right away, but he didn't. He loomed beside me like a small tower of pending violence.

"Have you seen a lot of casualties, Spaceman?" He asked.

"I've seen quite a few." I admitted. "I helped transport wounded soldiers during the battle over Betelren Six. We had some men expire during transit."

"Any combat duty?"

"Negative. I guess I've been lucky in that respect. I've always been popping up in places well back from the front lines." I sighed, remembering how happy I'd been earlier. "Today was the first time I've ever taken a bird out. I sure made a big mess out of doing that."

Renquist considered this. "I don't see how you can be blamed for it. Senior Spaceman Tennard was sitting right beside you. Even his many years of experience were not enough to keep us out of the frying pan this time."

I started yanking my blue pants over the humps of the dead man's buttocks, which let me tell you, wasn't easy.

"Douglas, I know you haven't received the same intensive training my Marines have," Renquist stated a moment later. "And I understand that Space Corps and Marine Division don't always see things eye to eye. What I need to know from you is that you realize that we're all in

this situation together, down to the last person. If we want to survive this mission we'll have to do it as a team."

It was an odd thing to say, since we hadn't encountered anything hostile yet. Did Renquist know something more than the rest of us?

"If I give you an order, an order that might even contradict Space Corps training, I want to be sure that you will do your best to follow it. Just like any of the other Marines under my command would. I'm asking for you to be one of us for the time being, a soldier, a Marine, and that you remain that way until we get off this stinking planet."

Don't ask me how I knew this, but I got the impression that Renquist truly believed he was going to die on Lesenia. "I will do my best to follow your orders, sir."

"Very good." Renquist said, immediately after this making an informal about-face and stepping toward one of the taller tree trunks. He stared up into its branches. "Menden, do you have any observations to report?"

"Just scout team one." The young Marine's voice drifted down. It was only then that I saw the man. He'd broken off a couple of leafy branches and set them around his perch so he'd be harder to pinpoint. "They're about two hundred yards out and approaching. Other than that, all is clear."

"Menden, I want you to climb back down." Renquist ordered. "On the double."

The Staff Sergeant paced about a bit, as if he were trying to sort things out in his head. The moment Menden reached the ground, he said, "Come with me."

Both men soon stood by my side.

I was on my knees, struggling to get my shirt on Finn's much longer arms.

"Menden, finish dressing Finn." Renquist requested. "Douglas, let's get a look at those radio parts. Rubalcava, I'm going to need you as well."

More than glad to leave the corpse behind, I turned the grisly chore over to Menden and stepped over to the LRR case. I unsnapped the hard plastic clasps keeping the case shut and opened both halves flat on the ground. When I saw the parts and the condition they were in, I bolted up to my feet. In a hot flash, I felt angry enough to start screaming obscenities into the air. Only the fear that some unknown enemy might hear me kept me from spouting off. Still, I stood there grimacing and gritting at the sky.

Renquist took a lingering glance at me and asked, "What is it, Douglas?"

"The spaceport personnel back on Earth did not replace the LRR case with a fresh one." I growled. "Half the parts in here have been tagged for repair!"

"Murphy's fucking Law." Rubalcava shook his head. (For those of you that are unaware, Murphy's Law is an adage that signifies: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, at the worst possible moment.)

"That's what they should have named this rock." Renquist crouched down close to the radio case, where sure enough he saw yellow and red tags in abundance. "It's been nothing but Murphy's Law ever since we made that last jump. Sort through this stuff, Douglas. See if you can find anything we can use."

Still fuming, I dropped to my knees and started tossing out everything that was internally depleted or externally damaged. Long Range Radios were always sent out in fragments because the pieces were so expensive to make. It was cheaper to replace half the radio than it was to lose

the entire thing. The four basic parts were the transmitter, the receiver, the coupler that held both things together and the battery. When I was done, I didn't have enough parts to make even one good LRR!

"I have three unused batteries," I inventoried the contents remaining in the case. "And two working transmitters. I have no good receivers and no good couplers. We still can't call anybody to tell them that we're stranded out here! This is fucking bullshit!"

Renquist straightened up. He called out, "Neelson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any sign of scout team two?"

"That would be a negative, Staff Sergeant."

"We've been sitting in one spot too long." Renquist turned back to face the rest of us. "Mason, Zachs, Shit For Brains, hurry up on that grave site. I want to get moving as soon as possible."

"Staff Sergeant." Rubalcava said. "I have an old model X-13 in my backpack."

"The old field radio?"

The Marine nodded. "It's almost an antique now. I was going to send it to my father because he has a collection of old war memorabilia. I picked it up at MDRS this morning, along with a couple of other things. Since we didn't have any resting quarters there, I just stuck everything into my backpack. You may not know this, but the LRR radios evolved from the X-13s."

"What are you suggesting?"

"The X-13 is a short range radio, but it does have a smart coupler on it." He looked at me next. "Do you think you can take it apart, put it back together with some of the parts you have there, and use it to call out?"

"No." I shook my head. "The coupler doesn't have the right shielding to handle the battery from an LRR. I can connect the pieces together and maybe use the radio for all of ten seconds, before the radiation from the stronger battery will start frying up the components. Even then, we'll only have half a working radio because we don't have a receiver capable of picking up a long distance signal."

"But you will be able to transmit for ten or so seconds?" Renquist asked. "Enough to get one short message out?"

"Theoretically, yes." I admitted. "If the coupler holds together that long."

"Ten seconds may be all I need." The Staff Sergeant calculated. "Rubalcava, let's get that old radio out. Find me the location of the nearest outpost to Lesenia."

"That would be Enoria, I think." Rubalcava quickly went to retrieve his backpack. He pulled out a tiny, laminated sheet from an outer pocket and began to study it. "Here it is. Enoria is outpost 03-44. If we can find a spot with decent elevation and no obstructions, I should be able to bounce a signal off one of the satellites orbiting this planet and send it their way."

I started sensing hope. "Once we transmit to the satellite, the satellite will inform the outpost computer of our radio signal. The outpost will know exactly where we are and they'll be able to come out here and get us!"

"Right." Rubalcava nodded.

"Negative." Renquist said. "That is exactly what we don't want. We don't want the outpost to know our location."

“Why not?” Rubalcava asked.

“Because I have a hunch.” The Staff Sergeant said, before he put some distance between himself and the rest of the men. “I need a minute to think.”

I noticed that the three men had stopped working on the grave and were now staring in our direction.

“Did he just say he had a hunch?” Zachs nearly whispered.

“He sure did.” Rubalcava nodded.

“We’re fucked.” Mason grimaced. “Plain and simple, we’re fucked up the yahoo.”

Even though I wasn’t part of the clique, I still asked, “What does that mean when Renquist has a hunch?”

“The day the shit hit the fan on Betelren Six, Renquist had a hunch.” Rubalcava explained. “He just walked into the barracks at Twenty-Nine Stumps that day and he looked like he was going to be sick. He said he had a hunch.”

“Not even three hours later,” Menden added. “The entire compound halts its training and we all get rounded up into the auditorium. The news starts trickling in on the space channel, that the Recruit Station out there is under attack. We all know how that went, right, at the beginning?”

Mass casualties, I vividly recalled. And a brand new enemy from the stars.

“When the Staff Sergeant has a hunch, it’s never a good thing.” Rubalcava said.

Mason repeated, “We’re fucked.”

Renquist rejoined us. “Three words. Our message will consist of three words to Enoria. These three words will be; Planet Lesenia, Non-Retrieval.”

Suddenly, half a dozen faces were gaping in the man’s direction, including mine. Non-Retrieval was the term used by troops when they were completely surrounded by the enemy, when there was no possible way out without an unacceptable loss of life. Any unit broadcasting such a message was in essence asking to be left behind to die.

“Staff Sergeant, will all due respect,” Rubalcava tried to reason with the hard man. “We haven’t seen anything hostile yet. We don’t even know if there are any Roaches on Lesenia. All we know so far is that we had a rough last jump on the Links. That could have been caused by a random magnetic field out in space somewhere, like from a meteor getting too close to our travel path. There could be all kinds of explanations for what happened during our trip.”

“I’m not worried about our trip, I’m worried about this planet.” Renquist corrected. “Hell, it may not even be the Roaches but something native here. I don’t know for certain what it is yet. What I do know is that I am not willing to further expose the Link System to anything that’s out here. Not until I’m positive that whatever we’re up against can’t hop onto the Links and make it back to any of the populated worlds.”

“Come on, Staff Sergeant!” Dempsey complained. “Don’t you think that going Non-Retrieval is taking it a little too far?”

“If it’ll make you guys feel any better, we’ll broadcast a cancellation code once we find and secure the outpost.” Renquist said. “But until then, my word stands. We’re Non-Retrieval and that’s not open to debate.”

After a few muttered grumbles, the three gravediggers went back to their task.

“Team one is coming in.” Neelson called out.

Renquist hurried over to meet them, followed closely by Rubalcava. Since I thought I could get away with it, by me also.

"Marines, report!" Renquist shouted.

"There's nothing to report." Dobson shook his head. "It's as dead as a cemetery out there."

"Did you see any movement?" Renquist pressed. "Any birds or animals? Did you hear any kind of wildlife noise at all?"

The two scouts looked at one another. Brickwell shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Nothing at all, sir." Dobson repeated. "The only thing out there making noise was the two of us."

"Damn." Renquist growled, before spinning around to face the grave site. "Hurry up with that hole, Marines!"

"We're going Non-Retrieval, guys." Dempsey informed the recent arrivals. "I just thought you ought to know that."

Brickwell shook his head. "I keep telling you guys. This rock is The Big Suck. The Suck Of Ages, even."

Rubalcava stepped over to where his pack lay. The Marine took a few moments to scour through it until he found the old X-13 radio. He brought it over and handed it to me. "Hope you can make it work, man. And for the record, I'm not liking this Non-Retrieval deal. Not one bit."

"Yeah, get started on that radio, Douglas." Renquist acknowledged. "But do not transmit until I give you the word."

"Yes, sir." I replied, heading over to the LRR case. I took out a battery package and a transmitter, and pulled out the quick-soldering supplies. These were hardly ever used since every outpost already had a set of tools on hand. People only went into the portable radio cases in emergency situations like this one.

A handful of minutes later, I had the X-13's coupler attached to the LRR transmitter, and a couple of wire leads ready that would lead out to the small, screw post battery. That was the only thing left to connect. I wasn't going to take the battery out of its package until it was absolutely necessary. Just holding that radioactive thing too long without the proper shielding would probably make me glow in the dark.

I looked over at Rubalcava. "You guys brought a Med Kit, right?"

"Yeah." The Marine glanced at the wrapped battery in my grip. "Neelson's got one in his backpack. He's our bandages guy. He'll get you all fixed up, unless you melt first."

"Thanks. I feel better already."

A small stir arose when the second scout team returned. Both Davis and Knotts looked shaken up. That was really saying something because they were among the bigger Marines.

"What's up, guys?" The first person to spot them, Strawberry, called out. "You both look like you've just seen yourselves in the mirror.

Knotts chuckled at the joke, but Davis sneered, "I will cut you, fool. You think I'm playing with you?"

The Marines not currently digging a burial plot started hovering toward them. Since I was as nosy as they were, I went over too. Heck, dressed in Finn's longer clothing, I looked like one of them now.

“So tell us what you saw.” Rubalcava said.

“We’re not sure.” Knotts replied. “We went out a full half a click, keeping our eyes peeled, but we didn’t see much of anything except these gray trees. That is, until we came up to this long row of hills.” He paused.

“Continue.” Renquist urged.

“We figured we might get a better view of the area if we climbed up on top of one of those hills, right. So we went up there to take a look. One of the hills caught our attention more than the rest of them, because it was smaller and it looked perfectly round on top, like a roll-on deodorant. And all around this weird little hill, there’s another kind of tree. They look like giant, gray pineapples, with the same color gray trunks and purple leaves that are on everything else around here. These pineapples were about five feet high and they had these long, oval-shaped leaves with one sharp end. The leaves were all about, what, three or four feet long. We estimated that there were thirty or forty of these weird pineapple trees surrounding this rounded hill. It just looked bizarre to us. Out of place.

“Anyway, we’re checking out these trees, when both Davis and I start to get that itch on the back of our necks as if somebody was watching us. We heard a noise like a short little rumble, coming from somewhere in the cluster of the pineapples, but we couldn’t see what made the noise from our twenty (location).”

Davis cut in. “We split up. I went one way and Knotts went the other. The plan was for me to head to three o’clock and Knotts to nine. We were going to converge at dead center. We were hoping we could get the target between us.”

“Yeah, only the target must have seen us coming.” Knotts said. “By the time we closed in, whatever made that noise was long gone. We never even saw it.”

“Did it leave any tracks?” Rubalcava asked.

“Nothing.” Davis shook her head.

“Things just keep getting better and better, don’t they, Rube?” Renquist snarled. “You said these hills have some elevation?”

“Not much.” Knotts guessed. “Maybe sixty, eighty feet or so. They are higher than all these trees around here.”

“That sounds like a good spot for our radio message.” Renquist said. “Davis, Knotts, I want you two to escort Spaceman Douglas back to that area. He’ll have a better transmitting angle out there than where we are now.”

Knotts made a face, clearly not eager to go back, but he didn’t speak out.

Davis wasn’t as polite. “Can’t you send someone else this time? We just came from there. Why the hell would we want to go right back out?”

“Negative.” Renquist firmly stated. “Rube, I want you to go with them. Maybe you can figure out what’s lurking around out there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hole’s done, Staff Sergeant.” The lanky Zachs called out. “Three feet deep, just like you said.”

“Good enough.” Renquist replied. “We’ll be using a flash grenade with a twenty minute timer. That will give us enough time to get Finn covered up. We’ll be tossing all those broken radio parts in there as well.”

"We don't need to do that, Staff Sergeant." Rubalcava mentioned. "We can just bury Finn and I'll mark the grave down on the GPS. We'll come back and get Finn later. That way he can get a proper burial."

"No." Renquist refused. "I don't want to take the chance that whatever is on this planet might find Finn's body and desecrate him somehow. I don't want any trace of Finn left, or of those broken radio parts. Mason, Zachs, you have your instructions. Davis, Knotts, we'll be heading due south at a steady walk. Keep your radio chatter short, just in case there's anything out there that can scan us."

Davis and Knotts both grumbled as Rubalcava and I hoisted on our packs. The makeshift radio I'd already placed inside the top of my backpack.

"Hey, flyboy, you might need this." Mason's gruff voice called out.

I turned to see a plasma rifle cutting through the air, barely had time to get my hands up before it reached me. Once it was in my grasp, I tried to glare back at Mason, but the big Marine had already turned in another direction. Zachs tossed over Finn's helmet as well.

"Now you've got a full outfit." Rubalcava said. "Let's get rolling."

Clumsily, I stuck the helmet under an arm while I slung the rifle on my shoulder. Then I remembered how loose Finn's backpack was and I had to start all over again. In the end, I got the pack tightened and the rifle slung, while the helmet I set and adjusted on the move.

"Stick your thumb up near your right ear." Rubalcava informed me. "If you press the button there, you'll turn on the short-wave wired into your bucket."

I did this as we stepped over to join our two escorts. Davis and Knotts were both looking at me as if I was their stepchild.

"Shit." Davis mumbled. "We're babysitters now."

The two hardy Marines started across the clearing.

"Don't worry about that." Rubalcava said, trailing along beside me as he adjusted his own helmet. "New guys are always shunned a little bit, until they prove themselves in a skirmish or two. Same thing happened to Neelson when he first joined the platoon a few weeks back."

If I was supposed to feel some kind of relief from that, it didn't happen.

"The funny thing about Neelson, though," Rubalcava continued. "He's been around for a minute or two, but he hasn't been able to click with any of us yet. He's a weird guy."

We trudged along silently for a few minutes, before I worked up the nerve to ask a question that had been bugging me, ever since the squad had entered the Purple Haze earlier. "How do you guys do it?"

"Sideways, mostly." Rubalcava joked. "Just kidding. How do we do what?"

"You know, start killing." Awkwardly, I tried to explain. "I've never killed anything in my life."

Rubalcava stared into my face for a long moment. "That, my friend, is a good thing. Most of us Marines don't see it so much as killing, but as reducing the enemy's ranks. The less of the enemy there is to contend with, the better the chances are of us making it back home. Of course, you've got your Hard Chargers like Davis and Knotts, who happen to thrive on death and destruction. Man, just wait until you see those two in action. At all times, they know exactly where they are and what they've got…"

"But how do you know?" I cut in. "How do you find out if you're even capable of killing another sentient being?"

"Sometimes you don't know, at least not at first." Rubalcava answered. "Sometimes it's the situation that will trigger the response. I wouldn't spend too much time worrying about it. If we end up getting into a firefight on this planet, you'll have zero time to analyze shit. Your instincts kind of take over. Either you do it or you don't. In the Marines, we call it being Born Again Hard."

"Well, what if…" I'll admit it, I was uneasy here. "What if the time comes and I can't do it? What if I wimp out?"

"Like I said, don't sweat it." The other man replied. "When it happens, it happens, but until it does you'll be on one side of the white line. If you have what it takes, then you get to cross that line and become like one of us, the Space Marines. And it you don't, you shouldn't take it so hard because not everyone is cut out for this kind of job. That's why the Marines are a tiny, little part of Space Corps. And that's why we have SID (Space Infantry Division) mopping up after us and you bus drivers escorting us around." He leaned over to punch me on the shoulder, and we both shared a quick laugh. "Just try not to get anybody killed while you figure things out."

I lost track of time as we kept bullshitting with each other. It came as a mild surprise when we reached the end of the normal-looking trees. There was a space of about fifty meters or so with nothing but black grass before us, and then the gentle slopes of the rolling hills started up.

Davis and Knotts were up further ahead, treading with wary steps. Just past them I could see the unnatural shape of one hill, which was over twenty yards high, cylindrical in shape with a dome top and covered with the same grass as the rest of the landscape. Compared to everything else around, the hill definitely looked artificial, like a small telescope observatory.

Growing in a weird swirl, a flock of bizarre pineapple trees could be seen, with the widest bunch of them being approached by the two Marines ahead of us, and the thinnest grouping up near where the strange hill stood. The trees were just as the two scouts had described: scaled like a pineapple but without the sharp edges. Their color was a strong gray, slightly darker on the edges of the scales, and they stood at a range of between five and five and a half feet high. A handful of leaves stood straight up at their crown, almost doubling the size of the trees with their added heights of between three or four feet. The leaves were in a shade of purple comparable to that of other vegetation we'd seen.

"What the heck are these things?" Rubalcava jogged over and I followed suit. He halted at the furthest edge of the trees, as seen from the round hill, and began examining their leaves more closely. "Lanceolate."

"What's that?"

"A type of leaf." The Marine explained, stepping around the tree without touching it. "These leaves are about half as wide as they are long, with no indentations." He glanced at the rest of the tree. "The distance around the trunk is about eight feet."

I watched as Rubalcava reached out and put his palm on the tree, probably to get a feel for its texture. As if he'd been bitten, he jerked his hand back.

"Holy shit!" The young man exclaimed. He bounced up and down on his toes as if he was daring himself, before he put his hand on the scaly bark once more. Again, Rube jerked his hand away. "Hey, Douglas, come and touch this thing!"

I stepped over, and yes, I was a little hesitant. Since Rubalcava had done it twice already, I reached out and put my own palm on the bark. For the first moment, it seemed as if nothing was happening. Then I felt as if the tree was somehow pulsing next to my flesh. Another moment, and a strange, prickly sensation began to spread all over my palm and fingers. This unnerved me so much that I yanked my hand back the same way Rubalcava had. The feeling faded away a few seconds later.

"What do you make of that?" Rubalcava asked. He repeated the experiment using his other hand.

"I've never felt anything like that." I shrugged. "I think the closest I came was back when I was a kid. I used to put nine-volt batteries on my tongue, just to get a jolt out of them. This felt a little like that."

"You used to do that, too?" Rubalcava laughed. "The thing is, that tingly sensation doesn't leave right away. It stays in your skin like some kind of numbing agent." He set his hand on the tree again, and held it there for what seemed some thirty seconds. Once Rube removed his hand, he stared at it as if he were mentally timing the creepiness. "My whole hand is numb!"

"You'd better be careful with that." I warned.

Rubalcava glanced back at the tree. "Yeah, you're right. This thing could be Lesenia's version of poison ivy or something. I'd like to dig one of these babies out and take it to a botanist back on Earth, if I could. Too bad I don't have the time or a big enough pocket to put this thing in. Let's catch up with the others."

We both jogged past the seemingly endless row of pineapples, and joined up with Davis and Knotts. Their pace had slowed considerably.

"Why do we always get the big green weenie (shit work)?" Knotts was heard complaining.

"Because we're the best at what we do." Davis replied. "We earned the big green weenie."

"All right, you two." Rubalcava said, loud enough to halt their conversation. "Why don't you 'fess up to what really happened out here?"

Davis grimaced.

"What are you talking about?" Knotts asked.

"You think you fooled everybody, but you ain't fooling anyone." Rubalcava shook his head, and for good effect, he spit. "The old man saw right through your shit story, but he didn't want to make it a big issue in front of the others. Why do you think he asked me to tag along with you guys? So, what's up? What did you guys really see out here that got you all spooked?"

Knotts relented. "You'll find out in a few minutes."

"Why don't you just tell me?"

"Fool, he said you'd find out, okay?" Davis grumbled at him. "Some things you just have to see for yourself."

Rubalcava glanced back at me, shrugging his shoulders.

The two scouts stepped further ahead, continuing along the edge of the trees and getting closer to the rounded hill. Here the pineapple trees were spaced at their thickest, even though their overall formation was at their thinnest. They were tightly packed, only about two or three feet apart from one another.

"Keep your weapon ready." Knotts stated, as he halted again. "And give it another minute or two."

Rubalcava scanned in all directions. “Stop screwing around and tell me what I’m supposed to be watching out for.”

Knotts glanced over at Davis.

“Well?” Rubalcava asked.

“Just tell this asshole what happened.” Davis made that face again.

“From the beginning,” Rubalcava said. “And no bullshit this time.”

“All right.” Knotts said. His cheeks blushed a little. “We came out here, just like we said we did. We saw how secluded it was and how we didn’t have anybody around. So we kind of started messing around. You’d better not tell anybody from the platoon about that, I swear.”

“The whole freaking platoon already knows the two of you are messing around.” Rubalcava shook his head. “Will you tell me something from today’s headlines?”

Knotts looked worried. “The whole platoon? How could they already know?”

“Well, she don’t call you Numb-Nuts for nothing, to start off with.” Rubalcava replied. “Anyway, get back to the story, will you?”

Knotts gaped back in shock. It was only later that I found out he had a fiancée waiting for him back on Earth.

“So, we were up here messing around,” Davis admitted, taking up the tale. “And like we said earlier, we got the feeling we were being watched.” She pointed her weapon at the large pineapples. “By these things. We didn’t know it was them at first, we thought it was something hiding in between them. We split up just like we said we did. Nuts went one way and I went the other. Dead center ended up being on the opposite side of this column of trees. Both of us had to cross through the pineapples to get there. Their leaves weren’t standing up then, like they are now. They were all drooped down at the sides. We ended up brushing and rubbing against a whole bunch of them. When we got to the other side we didn’t see or hear anything, but we were feeling funny after we’d been in contact with all those leaves.”

“Were you feeling numb?” Rubalcava asked.

“Yeah, at first.” Knotts nodded.

“I started seeing weird shit in my head.” Davis revealed. “Like colors and patterns and shit.”

“Me too.” Knotts concurred. “I swear I’ve never dropped acid in my life, but I bet I was seeing the same kinds of hallucinations.”

“But you want to hear the freakiest part?” Davis pointed her weapon at the trees again. “These plants started coming closer to us. They were moving.”

Rube glanced over at the plants, before turning his gaze at me. It was clear that he thought the two Marines were pulling his chain. “These trees were moving? You know they don’t have little legs on them, right?”

“Why in the fuck do you think we didn’t tell Renquist?” Davis snapped. “So the whole bunch of you mother-fuckers would be laughing at us like we’re crazy?”

“It was weird,” Knotts said. “Because I swear these plants were looking at us, and making noises at us, and even moving at us. We both ran up to the top of that round hill. We stayed up there until that weird feeling went away. When we felt normal again, we went all the way around the column. That’s why it took us so long to get back.”

“I thought they were trying to surround us.” Davis said. “I mean, I was getting ready to start blasting them.”

“We’re not crazy.” Knotts tried hard to sound convincing. “We really did think those things were happening, to the both of us, until our heads finally cleared up. But you can see why we didn’t want to tell Renk about it, right?”

“He probably would have said you two made the story up, as an excuse for having messed around.” Rubalcava reasoned.

“We thought the same thing.” Davis agreed. For a brief moment, her harsh features actually softened up. “And then everybody would have known about us messing around. I guess they already know, according to you.”

“Well, next time, you shouldn’t start calling him Numb-Nuts in front of everybody.” Rube said, as he reached into a thigh pocket to pull out a smart phone. It was a useless item, I thought, as Lesenia was too far from any planets with compatible satellites. Rube wasn’t using his phone to make a call. Instead, he started taking a few shots of the giant pineapples. “We really should take one of these trees back for study. They have numbing properties, possibly hallucinogenic properties. Who knows what else they might have.” He paused. “You know, I don’t remember seeing any vegetation like this in any of the outpost’s image files. I’m pretty sure I would have remembered a giant freaking pineapple.”

“Well, we came out here to send a radio message, so let’s do that.” Knotts said. “Then we can get the hell out of here before any other weird shit happens.”

“Who are you trying to reach, anyway?” Davis asked. “The outpost?”

“No.” Rube said, curtly, before he turned to me. “Hey, Douglas. Why don’t you pull the radio out while I get the coordinates ready?”

Simultaneously, we both shrugged off our backpacks.

“If you’re not calling the outpost direct, then you’re bouncing a signal off the satellite.” Davis guessed. “So you’re calling somebody to come pick us up, right?”

“Nope.” Rube said, and even I could see that he was being evasive. He handed me the little strip of laminated paper.

“Then who the fuck you calling?” Davis sounded irritated now.

“The word from Renquist,” Rube explained. “Is that since we’ve only got a half-assed radio anyway, we should send a quick message. The message is; Planet Lesenia, Non-Retrieval.”

Both Davis and Knotts started.

“Say again?” Knotts recovered first.

“Non-Retrieval.” Rube repeated.

“Renquist has gone motarded (motivated to the point of being retarded).” Davis growled. “The man is insane!”

“He had one of his hunches.” Rube explained.

Knotts brought his palm up to his forehead, in both worry and resignation. “We’re going to die out here, aren’t we? Dempsey’s been acting squirrelly for the last two days, and now the old man too?”

“You do realize we’re cutting our own necks by doing this?” Davis asked.

“Hey, Renk even gave the order to cremate Finn’s body.” Rube defended his superior. “So he really thinks some serious shit is about to go down. Now you tell me, when have any of his hunches turned out to be wrong?”

“I don’t like it.” Knotts shook his head.

“You think I do?” Rube retorted. “I don’t like being hung out to dry either. But if I have to sacrifice myself in order to keep the Roaches or anything else off the Links, then guess what? I’m going to do it! Better me than a whole outpost, right? Or how about a colony that doesn’t have that many defenses to begin with? You heard about Betelren Six! You want another butt-load of Roaches popping up in a place like that?”

“Get it over with.” Davis snapped. “Just get it done so we can get the hell out of here, before something else comes along that’s even weirder than these pineapples.”

Rube turned to me.

I had the radio, the coordinates and the unwrapped battery in my hand. “Is right here good?”

I hadn’t really expected an answer, and was surprised when both Davis and Knotts pointed at a fairly flat spot some twenty feet away. I didn’t know if they were kidding or not until Rube motioned for me to go along. He stopped at the right place. “Here’s good. Point the radio up in that direction of the sky. That’s near where one of the satellites should be right now.”

I glanced back at the two Marines, noting they’d both dropped to one knee. They were aiming their weapons as if they were about to use us for target practice. I gulped.

Rube and I both crouched in the appointed spot as I set the radio components down on the black grass. I took the battery out of its packaging and tossed the plastic wrapping aside. Right after, I wrapped the two ends of wire leading out from the coupler to the battery’s screw posts. The last things left to do were to switch the battery on, then the radio, and finally to start punching in coordinates.

“Okay, we’re going to have to do this quickly.” I said, deciding to hand Rube the coordinates after all. “After I switch this thing on, I have to enter my Space Corps ID code. Once the satellite confirms the code, I’m going to say ‘Go.’ Then you can start reading off the coordinates to me. You got me?”

“I got you.” Rube nodded.

“Here goes.” I said, clicking the battery on. A red LED light went on a moment later. Once I saw this I switched on the coupler. I punched in my code, but in my haste I screwed it up. I tried again a second time, slower, and succeeded.

The radio was already starting to get hot in my hand, when a confirmation from the satellite caused it to chirp. “Okay, go.”

Rubalcava started reading off the coordinates that would bounce the message to Enoria, slow enough that I entered them in correctly on one try. My hand felt as if I were holding it above a flaming burner. I finished the sequence. While I waited for another chirp, I snatched up the battery wrapping and placed it between my palm and the hot battery.

“Shit, this is hot!” I complained, right before the second chirp came. I was ready to broadcast now. “Enoria, Command Post Zero-Three-Four-Four, this is Harold Douglas, Spaceman on the Unilink Transport One-Twenty-Six, on planet Lesenia. We are code Non-Retrieval. Repeat, Outpost Zero-Four-Nine-One is Non-Retrieval.” I had to remove my fingertip from the coupler’s button for a second, pushing down with my thumb instead. “I repeat, planet Lesenia is Non-Retrieval. Zero-Four-Nine-One is Non-Retrieval.”

Unable to take any more heat, I dropped the radio down into the grass, where it soon started smoking. I reached down to try to disconnect the transmitter in the hopes of saving it.

“Leave it!” Rube ordered. “The unit’s fried, anyway.”

Needing no further motivation, I dragged myself several feet away. In awe, I watched as the radio burst into flames. In a couple of seconds, the fire had consumed everything.

"The battery is going to explode!" I warned Rube, as I quickly got to my feet. The plan was for me to break into a run, right after retrieving my rifle and backpack. "As soon as the fire melts away the outer core, it's going to pop!"

Rube backed up by a couple of steps, but he seemed mesmerized by the small blaze with the fascination of a pyromaniac.

"I'm serious, man." I shouted, reaching out to yank at his arm. "When that thing goes off, trust me when I say you don't want to be anywhere near it!" My fingers slipped off his cammie blouse, before I was hurrying away fast.

"Rube, let's go!" Knotts cried out.

Finally, Rubalcava got moving. He'd only gotten a few yards' distance, though, when a strong flash of white light swept past me. Immediately, I recognized the glow of a Pulse. I turned to see the Purple Haze materializing at a spot about twenty feet away from where we'd just transmitted the message.

Chapter 3

My next thought was of Senior Spaceman Tennard opening the hatch and stepping out to rescue us. The strange thing was that too soon after the shuttle's arrival, the hatch was already swinging open. Without warning, I watched Rubalcava drop down on one knee and rapidly swing his weapon toward the small vessel.

That's when I heard the clicking. The horrible clicking sounds that Roaches make, noises I'd heard before in recordings but never in person. The air was filled with the clicking sounds. They were like frantic snaps that grated into my ears, with the same sharp resonance as the sound of nails on a chalkboard.

Through the open hatch, I could see a dark, hunched form emerging. The form didn't get very far, as a blast of hot plasma from Rube's rifle tore out huge chunks from its midsection and sprayed them onto the vessel's outer wall. Black blood poured from the Roach's gaping wound as the animal thrashed about wildly, before it finally fell to the ground.

That was the moment that the burning battery decided to make itself known. With its own loud clamor, it exploded, sending corrosive bits flying out all over the place. The kneeling Rubalcava was pummeled back by the acid-laden shrapnel. As it burned into his clothing and flesh, it wrenched him into a screaming frenzy.

More loud clicks issued from the transport, where two rolled up Roaches popped out through the hatch. They leaped away by a good fifteen feet, in opposing directions. At the moment they hit the ground they unrolled themselves and stood straight up. In growing fear and revulsion, I watched as the Roaches lifted their two pairs of thin and thorny arms up before their faces, like some kind of bizarre Egyptian dance. They were getting into the firing position.

The projectiles they produced were invisible to the human eye, but I could see the rippling trail of steamed air that signaled they had fired upon us. Two large clumps of black grass exploded from the area where the battery had lain.

One of the dark creatures spotted me, angling its body to fire another heat blast. Filled with panic, I ran back toward the trees, fumbling with both my backpack and the rifle strap I had unwittingly twisted around my forearm. In desperation, I yanked at the weapon, only to feel it slip between my fingers and land on the ground next to me.

Another gouge of dirt burst up behind me, way too close. Between my forward momentum and my awkward flailing to recover my weapon, my foot slipped and I tripped down onto my face. As I landed in a clumsy sprawl onto the grass, I felt a third wave, as if from a flamethrower, pass only a few inches over my body.

The giant pineapple standing only a few feet ahead of me took the full brunt of the blow. The tree shuddered visibly and exploded, drenching me in moist bits and sticky goo. I rolled forward and to one side reflexively, and crawled behind the next tree over.

The sap from the pineapple started seeping into my clothing. Once it touched my skin, I began to feel that same creepy, crawly sensation I'd felt on my hand before. I tried to slap away the biggest bits, but the sap was all over me, spreading onto my skin.

The soft whine from the plasma rifles prompted me to peer around the wide tree. Davis and Knotts had both taken cover behind the pineapples as well. They'd already killed another Roach. The next enemy proved to be more elusive, as it rolled itself up again just before plasma slammed the creature to one side. This was the Roach that had taken two shots at me already. I watched as it hopped up into the air and landed halfway between the transport and my spot behind the tree.

It was after me, I thought, as the Roach unrolled and stood up on its two stumpy legs. My rifle lay just a few feet to one side of the monster, instead of being in my grip like it should have been. The Roach brought its four arms up and fired its indistinct projectile in my direction.

I shrank back behind the short tree, praying the missile wouldn't be strong enough to penetrate through its thick trunk. Bracing myself for the impact, I hunched forward and ducked my head toward my knees. I felt the force of the blast rip into the tree a moment later. A spear of electricity shot into my spine, where my back and the tree were still in contact. It was strong enough to jerk an agonized scream from my body. I shook from the sharp and burning jolt, right before the front of the tree exploded.

Suddenly, I felt my body become drained and numb. My energy gone, I barely managed to make a half-turn back toward the transport to see what was going on, before I crumpled to the ground uselessly. I could no longer move, believe me I was trying. From my new spot in the prone, I could see a blast of plasma rip into the attacking Roach. Both it and pieces of it went tumbling out of sight.

Incredibly, I next saw Rubalcava stagger up to his feet and limp toward the Purple Haze, all the while firing into the open hatch. Davis and Knotts were screaming for him to get out of the way, when Davis suddenly flashed by and started firing on the rear of the transport. That's where the Pulse Magnifiers were mounted. She was trying to blow the ship up, I realized, and destroy whatever number of Roaches were still trapped inside by Rube's continuous volley. There was a one hundred percent chance that by blowing up the Magnifiers, we'd be toast as well. Since I could barely breathe and much less get my mouth to work and cry out to her, all I could do was lie there on the ground and watch.

The reactors sizzled wildly from the plasma blasts. Davis was already moving back and away from the Magnifiers, when I saw Rube fall onto the grass so weakly that I thought he must have passed out, or worse.

A flash of blinding white light surrounded the damaged transport. It took all the will I had left to flutter my eyelids partly closed. The Pulse flared up and a split second later it faded away. The small transport was gone with it.

Knotts rushed over to Rube's side. My own line of sight was taken up by the towering figure of Davis. The tough woman marched up to me with more hate on her face than I'd ever seen her display before, and that was really saying something. Tersely, she lashed out a long and lean arm and snatched me up by the collar. The contact between her knuckles and my upper chest gave us both a jolt of static electricity, strong enough for her to snatch her fingers away.

Her hand dove at me again. This time she clutched me hard by a backpack strap, and started dragging me out from behind the destroyed pineapple. She was taking me toward where Knotts tended to Rubalcava.

"You dumb shit-brick!" Davis scolded me. "You're so scared you can't even move, can you? All you can do is drop your gun and go run and hide somewhere like a chicken-shit!"

"Rube is still alive." Knotts' voice called out. "He's in deep shock, though. Lots of small abrasions from the battery shrapnel, severe acid contamination. I'll try to pull out the biggest pieces of shrapnel with my tweezers and patch him up as best I can, but we have to get him back to Neelson right away. He'll be needing that poison treatment, as in right now."

"Flyboy's okay." Davis sarcastically commented. "He just got a little apple sauce on him, is all. But you know what, he can't even move 'cause he's so scared. How about we just leave his worthless carcass out here for whatever kind of buzzards this planet has, since all he did was turn tail and not even fire off a single shot!"

Knotts had some kind of response, but I didn't catch it. A gut-wrenching wave of nausea gripped my body. The use of my faculties returned. Just in time, too. I was barely able to yank Davis' hand away and turn, when the contents of my stomach spewed out in a stinky waterfall. I paused, dry heaving a bit, until a second wave lurched out whatever my stomach still had left.

"Figures." Davis said.

Once my revulsion subsided; I wiped the bile from my lips and gave her the most resentful countenance I could muster.

Davis actually chuckled, before she started for Knotts and Rube. She spotted my weapon in the black grass. "Don't forget your rifle this time, you dumb-ass, chicken-shit, mother-fucker."

I sat up, with my arms draped over my raised knees and my head hung low, as seven kinds of shame and humiliation draped themselves over my shoulders. I didn't stay there very long, as the smell from my vomit wafted up into my nose. Sheepishly, I got up and went over to pick up the fallen weapon.

I didn't want to step any closer to the Marines, but I didn't know where else to go either, until I saw the hideous corpse of the Roach a few yards away. Curiosity got the better of me, because my steps were soon headed in the dead creature's direction. The Roach smelled even worse than my vomit, but in order to get a good look at it I braved past the foul odor.

The Roach was about five feet high, with a pronounced hump just behind the helmet-shaped head. Its skin was a sinister shade of black, as dark as death, and it had a slight, polished sheen to it. On top of the head, two thick, six-inch protrusions, the antennae, sprouted out.

Its eyes were large bulbs, the size of tennis balls, crisscrossed with thousands of little platelets like a fly's. Its mouth was almost perfectly round. The mouth didn't open up like a human being's in the form of a slit. Instead, it opened up in a widening circle. Within this round cavern I could see one continuous row of tiny, triangular teeth. From all accounts, those teeth were razor-sharp. I could understand why the creatures were nicknamed Roaches, because that's what they looked like from a distance. Up close, however, it was clear they were something else.

Gazing further down on the creature's body, I counted four long, double-jointed arms, the first pair high on the thorax, the second about eight inches below that. A third pair of limbs, thicker and shorter than the others, served as legs for when the animal went bipedal. There were no fingers or toes visible, just circular paws that ended in rubbery-looking pads, with numerous wrinkles on them that were said to aid the creature's grip.

Looking back up at the four arms, I had to stare hard to find the Roach's minimal armor. They were mere sleeves, said to be nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the upper limbs. The sleeves were supposed to run the length of the last section of the arm up to an inch or two from the paw. They were some sort of bio-weaponry that was said to amplify the Roach's natural

offensive capability. Since this was my first actual Roach encounter, I couldn't figure out exactly where the sleeves were.

I thought of asking one of the Marines to point them out to me, but I was too squeamish after my actions earlier. I did notice that Knotts had cut the sleeve off of Rube's cammie blouse with his field knife, and was now hurriedly applying some sort of pain relieving and blood clotting cream to the worst of the wounds. Rube moaned at the vigorous movement. At least he was alive.

"I'm moving fast so we can get moving fast." Knotts tried to console the injured soldier. "I don't want to be hanging around when the Roaches come back for round two."

"They won't be coming back in the Purple Haze." I mentioned, still standing by the dead Roach. "The Pulse Magnifiers were too badly damaged by the weapon fire."

"Then how did the transport Pulse away from here?" The big Marine asked.

"The outpost must have Pulsed it back." I guessed. "From the way those Magnifiers were sizzling when the transport left, I thought they were about to blow up. It's a good thing the vessel Pulsed out when it did, or we might not be standing here now talking about it."

"So there is no way that transport can come back?"

"Not unless the Roaches can remove the damaged reactors and replace them with new ones." I replied. "The outpost can send out an Emergency Pulse to recover a vessel, but it can't Pulse one out the same way. A transport has to Pulse itself out."

After noticing the attention I was giving the dead Roach, Davis trudged back in my direction.

"You take a good look at that thing, flyboy." She said, using her boot to tip the nasty beast onto its side. "You see that bony ridge going down this Roach's back? That's its spine. The entire carapace is fifteen to twenty times denser than human bone. Regular rounds can't penetrate that, and plasma rounds can't penetrate that. If the Roaches decide to ball themselves up and roll all over the place, there isn't a damned thing our weapons can do to them. All we can do is keep firing at them to deflect them aside, but these things have such a keen sense of balance that they can recover and roll themselves out to wherever they want to. We have to wait for them to come to a stop and stand up before we even have a good shot at them. And the only time they do stand up is right before they shoot compressed heat at us." The tough female allowed the Roach to slip onto its back again. "When you aim, you have to aim for their upper bodies or their heads. Why don't you try it?"

I didn't quite grasp what she was getting at, so Davis made the point crystal clear.

"Go ahead and shoot the fucking thing!" She admonished. "Don't stand there and think about it, just squeeze the trigger. Take a good look at those teeth! A real good look! If the Roaches are running on the ground, they're much faster than we are. We'd be doing nothing but knocking them aside by a few feet with our weapons. In the meantime, we'll have a couple dozen of them moving toward us at once. Every shot that we take to push one back means the others will be three or four feet closer to our position. And if they get close enough to knock us down, guess what part of us they attack first with those razor-sharp teeth? They will go after our faces first, or our throats. They will kill us without giving it a second thought! So pretend this alien piece of crap is taking a noon-time nap, take that freaking rifle that's in your hands and shoot this fucking Roach, before it wakes up and starts tearing your face off!"

I did hold the weapon out, but it was more due to my fear of Davis' hostility than anything else. I pointed it shakily towards the black corpse, the tip of the rifle only about six inches from

the Roach's horrible mouth. While looking at its grotesque countenance, I tried to pull the trigger back. I tried to lash out in the same way the Roach would have undoubtedly done to me. Believe me, I tried, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. With the whimper of a defeated man, I slowly withdrew the rifle.

"That's the difference between you and me." Davis berated, squeezing the trigger on her own weapon. The suddenness of the action startled me, as much as the sharp hiss of the rifle and the flying bits of alien flesh and blood that flew up into my face. "I can and you can't."

"We'd better get moving." Knotts announced, taking to his feet and hoisting his pack on. "They may not be able to use that specific transport to come after us, but the outpost still has three other transports on this planet. If the Roaches can come out to these coordinates with one, I'm sure they can come out here with another."

The big Marine pulled a groaning Rube up on his feet, holding the weak man steady.

"This might hurt a little." Knotts said, right before he stooped and pulled Rube onto his broad shoulder.

Rubalcava yelped and clamored for a few seconds, until Knotts had him more or less settled in place. When the wounded man's noise reduced to occasional whimpers, it gave the big soldier a moment to speak.

"Davis, take point through the trees. If another transport of Roaches does pop up, we can use the trees for cover. The pineapples might numb the crap out of Rube, but considering his sorry state that's probably a good thing for him."

Davis gave me one last glower, before she made a casual about face and jogged toward the long line of trees. "Meet you on the other side!"

The second she moved through their folds, a large section of the pineapples around her dropped their leaves to their sides.

"What the fuck?" Davis crouched down as close to the ground as she could, but she still had several leaves draped around her head and shoulders.

The unexpected action left Knotts unnerved as well. "We have to cross through them. If we stay on this side and another transport appears, there's no cover until we're back in the forest." He glanced down the long procession of trees, seeing that the rest of them were also lowering their leaves. "It's got to be some kind of natural thing because they're all doing it. Let's just get through and get the hell out of here."

Davis nodded, before she scampered out of sight.

"All right, Rube," Knotts muttered. "Here we go."

The tall Marine started through the foliage. As I watched, I could almost swear that some of the purple leaves they brushed against were clinging to Rubalcava's limp form.

I hung back a little, not wanting to stand near the smelly Roach carcasses, but after I'd shown myself to be such a coward I didn't want to walk too close to the Marines either. I should have been stronger, braver, anything better than the miserable, pathetic excuse for a soldier that I had been. I was so pathetic I couldn't even bring myself to shoot a Roach. The most vicious and hated enemy the human race had ever encountered had been standing right in front of me, and the only thing I'd done was drop my weapon and start running for my life. I couldn't even make myself shoot a dead Roach.

I wondered if I could bring myself to shoot anything, ever. I had the plasma rifle in my grip and I brought it up to the firing position. I pointed it at the nearest tree, trying to convince myself that I could pull the trigger the next time I was involved in a harrowing situation.

The tree was defenseless. It wasn't any kind of threat. If I shot it, the tree's only real sin was that it had grown up in that specific spot. In this moment of utter and unforgivable weakness, I couldn't even bring myself to shoot a fucking plant.

A slight creaking noise interrupted my thoughts. I glanced around trying to find its source, but nothing seemed out of place. I held still, concentrating on finding the sound again. After a few moments, I did hear it. It was a low rumbling coming from the ground beneath me. The sound was also indefinite, as if it was coming from several directions at once.

As I took in the landscape again, I felt that my perception was becoming unclear. It looked to me as if some objects were now blending together when they hadn't been before, as if things had moved when they had no right to move.

The rumbling subsided and I gasped incredulously at the sight that lay before me. The gray pineapples had clustered to either side. In their midst they'd left a path some three feet wide for me to step through. The Marines were well on their way by now, so I couldn't turn to them for answers.

A moment later, I began to feel a chill, a fear, start moving through my body. It was telling me to run, to flee from those strange pineapple-shaped trees, because there was something inexplicably wrong with them.

I yielded to this growing dread, bolting like a rabbit with a hound at its tail, in the only direction where I was sure to find safety. Rushing through the trees, I felt the hanging leaves slapping at my face and arms, stinging me with their bizarre numbness. All the while I imagined them closing their ranks around me. I could see them pressing tight against my body, crushing me between their gray trunks, until I was left with only my head and one arm free as I struggled to escape their grasp.

These frightening thoughts propelled me through the foliage even faster, enough that I didn't slow my speed once I got through it. I saw the Marines in the distance, entering the opposite end of the large swirl of pineapples. I kept running toward them. The rows of pineapples on this side were much wider, with the trees spread further apart. I was soon through these as well. I didn't stop running until I was about ten feet behind the rest of the party.

Davis glanced back at me and spit. "Well, look who's here, and showing that marathon instinct once again."

Huffing from the exertion, I tried to convey what I'd just seen. "The trees…" I started, out of breath. "They've alive!"

"Of course they're alive, you dumb fool." Davis scolded me. "How else do you think they grow like that?"

"Not what I meant." I panted.

"Just shut your trap and keep your rifle ready." Davis growled.

"Uunnn." Rubalcava moaned. "Did we get them Roaches?"

"But the trees…" I tried again.

"Spaceman, do us all a favor and be quiet." Knotts said. "Hey Rube, yeah, man, we got them."

"Damn straight." Davis said. "Three on the outside and at least a couple more on the inside. The rest of them didn't even make it past the hatch. I almost blew up the whole damn ship."

"That's no good." Rube said.

"Why not?"

"Because I was trying to get to the cargo holds." Rube explained. "I was trying to find out if maybe there were any more LRR radio parts in there, so we could warn Space Corps that the Roaches <cough> were on Lesenia now. Uunn."

"Don't talk so much." Knotts stated. "Save your energy until we catch up with the others. I'm sure Neelson has some kind of anti-battery acid medicine in his backpack."

"Oh, my chest hurts." Rube complained. "It feels like I got shot in the chest, and I'm tingling all over. Hey, Jesus! I can't feel my arm! Where's my arm?" The Marine struggled to turn his head, rubbing his face roughly against Knott's broad back. "Thank heaven it's still there. You tied it to my side, huh? How come I can't feel it? How much pain killer did you guys shoot me with?"

"I hope you don't think we're engaged or anything." Knotts joked. "But I rubbed congeal cream on your arm, on a part of your upper leg and on your chest. I gave you two shots of painkiller. On top of that, we went through the column of pineapples twice."

"That explains some of it, but I'm numb all over, man. Even my neck is numb."

"Davis, listen," I tried to share my experience again. "Back there, the trees…"

"Can it, flyboy." Davis cut me off. "Nobody wants to hear it."

I clammed up, because if I said anything further Davis would probably start pounding on me. We were back among the 'regular' trees by then, I noticed.

Rube sounded as if he was whimpering. "Level with me, guys. Am I going to make it or am I a goner?"

"You idiot," Knotts kept his steady pace up. "Of course you're going to make it."

Rube giggled. "I know, I know. I was just screwing with you guys. I've always wanted to ask somebody that except it was never the right moment, you know?"

"You'll be all right." Davis commented. "Except for your leg."

"What's wrong with my leg?" Rube was suddenly wary. "You guys know I can't feel my legs. I can't even tell if I still have them or not. Douglas, tell me if I still have my legs, man, because I can't trust either one of these lying bastards."

Davis and Knotts both chuckled.

"Your legs are still there." Knotts admitted. "It's your brain that got sucked out, you dummy."

"I really hope you guys are just pulling my nuts." Rube grinned. "You had me going there for a minute." He started coughing again. "Ooh! My chest hurts."

"Stop talking and stop squirming around so much." Knotts warned him. "You took some good shrapnel bits to the left side of your body, for being dumb enough to stand next to an LRR battery while it exploded. You're lucky you didn't get a bunch of acid on your face."

"It could have ruined my good looks."

"Trust me, you never had them." Davis countered.

"You've got a lot of acid in your system right now." Knotts stated. "I pulled a lot of the bigger shrapnel bits out as fast as I could, but by then the acid was already seeping into the wounds. You have to save your energy until I get you back to Neelson."

“Gotcha, boss man.” Rube quieted down. This only lasted about a second, as the wounded soldier glanced back in my direction. “Hey, Douglas, now you know, huh?”

“Know what?” I asked.

“What side of that white line you’re standing on.”

Another wave of shame washed over me. I slowed my pace to distance myself further from the Marines.

“You know,” Knotts spoke up. “I don’t think those Roaches were soldiers.”

“They weren’t.” Davis agreed. “They went down way too easy and they didn’t even have armbands on them. They were something else.”

That explained why I hadn’t seen the armor sleeves, I thought.

“The way that one Roach was firing at Spaceman,” Knotts considered, before he started shaking his head. “I mean, it was concentrating on Douglas even when he was running away from it, even when Douglas didn’t pose any threat to it. That thing took at least three good shots at him and missed every single time. Any good Battle Roach would have nailed him on the first try, just based on proximity. And the other Roaches, the ones inside the transport, who knows how many of them were in there because they didn’t even make it outside. What’s up with that? We’ve seen Roaches get cornered before. They always start rolling themselves up and jumping out like popcorn.”

“So if they weren’t Battle Roaches, what were they?” Davis asked. “Rookies?”

“Engineers.” Rube said, lifting his head, and inexplicably, looking in much better spirits than before. “The reason they were inside that transport was because they were trying to figure out how to work the controls. That’s why they seemed so confused when they first came out of the Pulse. I don’t think they were expecting to travel. All of a sudden there they were, looking out the hatch at our plasma rifles. And then, when they heard the melting battery go off, they automatically assumed that was part of our arsenal, because I saw them fire heat at it. Any Battle Roach would have instantly aimed at the guys holding the guns.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Knotts said. “Why would they send a bunch of engineers out to investigate the radio signal? Why not send Battle Roaches who know what they’re doing?”

“They wouldn’t.” Davis replied. “Those engineers must have accidentally flipped enough switches to set the transport in motion.”

Rube looked back at me. “What do you think about that, Douglas?”

Timidly, I replied. “Knowing what we know about Roaches, it would have been extremely difficult for them to accidentally end up at the hill so quickly. The satellite would have informed the outpost of the LRR radio signal, so they would have known our location right way. But even if the Pulse Magnifiers were fully loaded, the navigation computer from the outpost would have to communicate with the computer from the transport. The Roaches had about a minute and a half to tell the transport where to go. As far as we know, they’re not advanced enough to figure things out so fast.”

“Maybe the people at the outpost helped them.” Rube suggested. “If they were brainwashed or something. That’s happened before.”

“Well, whether they had help or not, they must have figured that all out.” Davis reasoned. “They saw the bright red energy trace from the radio on their scanners, they got the coordinates to the shuttle computer and they Pulsed their smelly butts over here on the double.”

“It makes sense, except for one detail.” Knotts reminded her. “Those weren’t Battle Roaches in the transport. Those were probably engineers, like Rube said.”

“That’d be a stupid move, wouldn’t it?” Davis surmised. “And the Roaches don’t make stupid moves like that. They study their shit good before they act on it.”

“Things just keep getting weirder out here, don’t they?” Knotts commented.

Rubalcava said, “It’s not possible. The Roaches could not have figured out how to work the transport controls because that would mean they’ve mastered our language and our technology. And we know they’re just not that quick. It takes them all kinds of generations just to move from one galaxy to another. They have to be a few centuries behind us as far as technology goes.”

“How’d they get to Lesenia so fast, then?” Davis asked. “Nobody’s ever seen Roaches in this corner of space. The outpost people have only been out here, what, three or four months?”

“Do I look like I have all the answers?” Rube shot back, after which he started struggling to escape from Knott’s strong grip. “Let me down, Numb-Nuts. I think I’m about to puke.”

“What are you doing?” Knotts asked.

“I said, off!” Rube began to pummel at the bigger man’s back until the Marine finally relented. Once Rube was on the grass, he began to wobble around on unsteady legs for a few moments, like a newborn deer. Quickly, he got his bearings and hurried over to the nearest tree, where he loudly retched. Along with the vomit, he spewed out a handful of choice expletives. Once this was all done he strode back to the group, loosening the wrap on his arm so he could move it again. “See, I just had to get my land legs working again.”

Knotts stared in disbelief at Rube, turned toward Davis briefly, and back to Rube. “Do you know how toxic that battery acid is? You should be going through convulsions and turning different colors right now!”

“Well, I’m not doing any of that, am I?” Rube replied. He pulled at his torn sleeve, seeing red, livid scars on his arm, instead of fresh and bloody wounds. “The whole side of my body is itching like crazy. Anyway, you can see that I’m standing on my own two legs. I’ll even do some dance moves if you want me to. I’ll have Neelson check me with the Med-Scan once we get back with the squad. You can count on that. I may be stubborn, but I ain’t stupid!”

Knotts looked back over at Davis.

“Like you said, things keep getting weirder.” She remarked.

Rube demanded to have his weapon and pack from Davis. After he took a couple of moments to adjust his equipment, the four of us started moving at a faster pace. Davis and Knotts were at their customary spot in the lead, while Rubalcava and I brought up the rear.

“Hey, Douglas?” Rube asked.

“Yeah?”

“This planet is really starting to freak me out. Don’t get me wrong, because I’m glad I’m still alive and all. But anywhere else I’d probably be dead by now.” He chuckled. “I wish I wasn’t itching like this, but I’m kind of afraid to touch all these scars.”

“Trust me, I’m freaked out, too.” I answered. I was about to bring up the moving pineapples again, but Rube was already talking.

“Hey, about what happened back there, with you.” He was saying. “How you reacted and everything. Don’t take it so hard.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

"No, listen to me, man." Rube continued. "What you did, by running away to hide behind the trees, don't worry about that. That was just your survival instinct kicking in. Think of it as your first test. There are going to be other tests, and I know this for a fact because we have now confirmed that there are Roaches on this planet. Anyway, each test you come to today will help define you into the man you're going to become tomorrow. But right now, at least you know where you stand. That helps you out a heck of a lot."

"How does being a coward help me out?" I snapped at him.

"Because now you're getting an idea of what it's going to take to do better the next time." Rube replied. "Look, I'm going to tell you something that I don't like telling anybody. The first time I got caught up in a crossfire, I was so scared that I didn't fire my weapon either. Some of the guys around me had to take up the slack. We all have to go through that moment, between what you were before and what you're about to become. Combat toughens you up that way, but that's not what makes you a Hard Charger. That's when you learn to put your fear aside, and you say: Fuck it, I may be about to go down for good, but I'm taking a butt-load of Roaches down with me."

I let the words sink in. Maybe somewhere down the road I would get the chance to make up for my cowardice.

Every ten minutes or so, Knotts sent out a message through the short wave radio built into our helmets, to try and get in contact with the rest of the squad. We'd been walking close to an hour when the tall Marine stiffened up. He held his arm up in a fist, causing Davis to drop into a crouch and aim her weapon. Walking up behind them, Rube tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to follow suit.

Knotts signaled that he would be moving east, and he directed Davis to go west. He glanced back at the two of us and made the sign of two fingers walking very slowly. Then, the big Marine tapped his helmet and pointed at Rube. Moments later, he and Davis disappeared into the brush.

Inquisitively, I glanced at the soldier next to me.

"Tread softly and keep your voice low." Rube warned me with a whisper. "That's what I was talking about earlier. These guys have like a sixth sense or something that warns them when there's a shit-fan up ahead. They're doing a pincer move by spreading out in opposite directions and trying to catch whatever threat there is between them. That means that you and I have to go right up the middle, since I'll be coordinating their movements through the radio. It might be time for you to show us what you're really made of, Spaceman."

"I don't hear anything."

"Just keep your weapon steady." Rube said. "We'll know what's going on in a minute or two."

Indeed, we'd only crept up by about forty feet when the noisome odor hit us. It smelled so awful I wanted to throw up again; it was the scent of warm animal urine mixed in with animal sweat and rotten vegetables.

"Roach rot." Rube grimaced in disgust. "Usually, the stink builds up the closer we get to them. This smells like we're about to step right into one of their freaking nests."

We moved forward through the trees, quietly and steadily. Each and every step brought us closer to the nasty alien stink. The clicking could be heard again when we reached the edge of a

small clearing. Rube crouched beside a tree and pointed away. At a distance of about thirty yards, I could see the frantic and furtive movements of dozens of Roaches.

I felt the fear rising up inside me, as I watched the creatures dodge and dive between the clearing and the trees. I noticed that their clicking was frequently interrupted by the soft whine of several plasma rifles.

"Is that the rest of the squad?" I asked.

"Chances are it is." Rube nodded. "Watch my back for a minute while I try and get in touch with them."

I nodded, as Rube positioned his body entirely behind the cover of a tree. He pulled a small microphone stick out from the side of his helmet, until its end was close to his mouth. "Staff Sergeant Renquist, this is the radio team. What is your situation, copy?"

A few anxious moments passed before an answer was heard.

"Rube, this is Dempsey." The voice announced into my ear, as well as Rube's. "We are in fucking peril out here. We're pinned down inside a strange-looking hill, and we have maybe two or three dozen Roaches zigzagging outside. Hold on." There was a pause. "Renquist wants to know your twenty. His radio is on the fritz again."

"Uh, thirty yards north and slightly east of your position." Rube replied, as he leaned ahead to scan the landscape. "I can see the back of the hill from here."

"Can you give us an enemy count?"

"I can't see the entire field from here, but it's at least three dozen. Tell the old man that Davis and Knotts are positioning for a pincer move from the east and west."

We watched as the Roaches ran back and forth across the clearing in seemingly random paths. Some stopped to fire toward the hill while the majority dashed in spurts. They either kept running all the way to the other side of the clearing, or halted halfway across and scurried back to wherever they'd started their strange dash.

Rube looked fascinated by their movements. Once he covered up his mike he said, "Do you see what they're doing? By constantly being in motion, they're giving the squad the impression that there's a lot more of them out there. At the same time, they're making each individual Roach harder to target. They won't get tired, either. They can keep running around like that all day and all night."

Dempsey's voice came back over the radio. "Renk says we're too heavily outnumbered right now. He wants you guys to divert the Roaches away from the hill, so that we can get the hell out of here and find a more defensible spot."

"East and West, do you have your ears on?" Rube asked.

Knotts answered first. "I copy the diversion. I need two minutes to plan an escape route."

Davis chimed in next. "I copy the diversion also. Give me four minutes to find a hidey-hole. I've got heavy brush on this side."

"Copy that." Rube said.

"Copy four minutes." Dempsey acknowledged.

"Here's what happens next." Rube pushed his mike out of the way. "Davis and Knotts are going to create a diversion by tossing out some thermite grenades. Since they're going to do it simultaneously, it's going to throw the Roaches off balance. The Roaches tend to follow herd mentality. If they think a force greater than theirs is hitting them, their first instinct will be to run

deep into the forest and regroup. Once they realize that no gigantic swarm of Marines is running out after them, they're going to split up into three groups. One bunch will go after Davis, the second after Knotts and the third group is coming right back here. We're going to have less than five minutes to pick off any stragglers and help the squad get to safety."

"Ready to rock and roll." Knotts announced over the radio.

A few moments later, Davis' unsteady voice came in. "As ready as I can be."

Once he pulled his mike back out, Rube announced. "Diversion will commence on my count, three… two… one… zero."

I wasn't exactly relishing the notion of being in a pitched battle with the dark alien menaces. Before the fear could overwhelm me completely, the action erupted all over. The first explosion was loud enough to jar me, coming from the east and crowned by a great cloud of dirt from between the trees. A second later, I heard a similar explosion from the west, followed quickly by another. All kinds of hysterical clicking erupted from the clearing.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the entire forest was alive. The taller of the black grasses had perfectly concealed many more of the alien infestation's troops than had been actively involved in the assault. After hearing the explosions, a great number of Roaches stood up, glanced around, clicked out loud and leaped into a hurried retreat. I shuddered as I imagined so many of the fierce black creatures racing in my direction.

"We are in deep shit, my friend." Rube tensed his grip on his rifle. "That's got to be at least a hundred fucking Roaches out there. Get ready to fire."

From the clearing, a single Roach stumbled toward us on two feet, moving at a much slower pace than its peers. It limped along, possibly in pain. As it got closer to us, I could see that parts of its left arms had been damaged by plasma fire.

Since the creature would pass only a few feet from our position, Rubalcava seized the opportunity to ambush it. The Marine jumped out in front of the alien, pointing his rifle directly at it. Instinctively, the Roach grabbed at the weapon with all four of its upper limbs. Rube had been counting on this, as he threw his weight forward and toppled the creature onto its back. While the injured Roach struggled with his rifle and weight, Rube made a quick grab for the field knife secured to his belt. Repeatedly, Rube plunged the polished blade at what passed for the creature's throat, even as the gaping maw aimed its serrated teeth toward his face. The animal bucked and writhed below him for a few seconds, until it finally weakened and died.

"One less Roach." Rube muttered, quickly wiping his blade on the dark grass and sheathing it. "No more flash bombs, either. That means that Davis and Knotts are on the run, or worse." He yanked his weapon away from the dead Roach's grip. "It's time for us to join the party, Spaceman. Don't let me die out here."

Rube scanned the clearing one last time, before he ran from the cover of the trees. Not even ten seconds later, two Roaches stood up from the depths of the black grass and pounced on him from either side. The Marine managed to slam the first one away with the stock of his rifle, but the second dropped on his side like a sack of bricks. Rube fell over as four black arms battered at his two. Before my horrified eyes, the Roach drew its circular mouth closer to the man's head. The teeth actually stretched out, ready to clamp onto human flesh. My rifle was the only thing standing between Rube and certain death.

I had to do something, I realized, to stop the assault on the closest person I had to a friend on the entire planet. I shuddered, forcing the fear to the back of my mind, as I pointed the weapon at the monstrosity's back. Without thinking, I undid the safety and tore back on the trigger, feeling the tight recoil of the rifle against my bicep. A short burst of plasma exploded from its tip, drawn like a laser toward the Roach's thick back and knocking it off the stunned Marine.

I thought; thank goodness that Space Corps required basic weapons training for all of its employees, although I couldn't brag much about my accuracy. My saving grace was that the Roach's carapace was a big target and it wasn't that far away.

Instinctively, the stunned Roach jumped back to its stumpy feet, lifting its arms and turning its head to ascertain where the shot had come from. By then, I'd squeezed the trigger again and sent another blast of plasma on its way. The damned thing was too close to miss. The bolt ripped into the creature's unprotected stomach, spewing its red and black contents onto the dark grass.

Rube rolled aside, right as an invisible beam of scorching heat burst the ground where he'd just been. For a second, I watched the tiny eruption of dirt and grass, before I swung the rifle at the same moment the second Roach turned to face me. As it repositioned the angle of its arms, I squeezed the trigger. My next two shots ripped into the area just below the creature's throat and sent more black and red pieces flying in all directions. This bloody carnage, this was what war was really about, I thought grimly.

Rube rolled back to retrieve his rifle. Once it was in his grasp, he spun himself onto his stomach and aimed the weapon across the clearing. "Here they come, Spaceman!" He cried out. "Remember, aim for the eyes and legs. When you shoot, you roll, otherwise you're toast!"

That's when I realized I was standing out in the open. I ducked back by a few feet to stand by the nearest tree. Half a dozen Roaches were now scrambling through the grass at us, while Rube did his best to drop plasma on top of their heads. A few the brave Marine hit directly, while the rest he kept shoving back with the brute force of his missiles. The Roaches were seen to scatter, regaining their bearings quickly so they could angle themselves for another run.

I blasted away randomly, but the Roaches were so fast and my aim so clumsy that I didn't think I was doing anything at all to them. I hoped I was at least distracting some of them! In a more expert manner, Rube finished them off.

"Move forward!" He cried out, and in a low crouch he hurried closer to the squad's hiding place.

The hill was just like the one we'd seen earlier, I realized, cylinder shaped and with a perfect semi-circle for a top. As we ran around it, I could see an unusually rounded cave entrance, as if the hill was somehow yawning symmetrically to its outer structure.

"Give me two grenades, at ten o'clock and two o'clock!" Renquist's harsh voice battered at the air like a flyswatter. "Ten second detonation!"

Mason appeared, tossing out the first. He looked even scruffier and angrier than before. A second form appeared, only to be thrown back violently by a Roach heat wave. A good portion of this man's upper body exploded into a sickly spray of flesh and blood.

Renquist stepped out next, crouching, firing and moving aside to keep himself from being targeted. At the sound of the first grenade going off, the Staff Sergeant looked to be firing randomly. "Fall out, jarheads! Back behind the hill!"

Rube fired without aiming as well. I raised my weapon to do the same when I got pummeled into from behind. A big, black blur had shoved me down onto a shoulder. I could feel it tearing away at my backpack with its limbs. It slapped a paw across my face, scratching my cheek with its rough ridges. A second paw smacked into my temple. I tried to get my rifle up, between my head and the Roach's teeth, but it had already gotten two of its paws on the weapon. It was about to yank the rifle from my grip. The maw opened up and all those teeth began reaching out for me. Suddenly, the business end of a rifle got inserted into that gaping saw of a mouth.

"Say cheese!" Rube's voice called out, right before a plasma blast exploded the Roach's entire face all over my upper half. With a harsh kick, Rube kicked the flailing Roach away from me. "Always watch your back, Douglas! Didn't they teach you anything at Spaceman School?"

"They taught me how to fly a fucking transport!" I shouted, trying to slap some of the smelly debris away from my face.

"Random fire into the trees!" Rube gave me room to stand. "This makes them think we're chasing after them."

"All of you, back behind the hill!" Renquist ordered.

Mason fired a few more shots, before bolting like a hare.

I saw Brickwell stooping down to grasp the fallen soldier's tags, but he wasn't finding them among all the gore.

"We don't have time for that!" Renquist screamed at the man. "Grenade, one minute timer!"

Brickwell quickly complied. The remnants of the squad rushed around the hill and into the trees behind it. Rube and I caught up with them.

"On the run!" Renquist ordered, as the dwindling group rushed into the trees.

The grenade soon sounded off behind us. I imagined the remainder of some unfortunate soldier's body being sent to oblivion in very tiny fragments.

We slowed to a jog almost ten minutes later, and halted another five minutes after that. The winded men, including myself, finally had a chance to catch their breaths, barely. A couple of minutes later we started a double march due south.

"Didn't I tell you this was going to happen?" Dempsey whined, clumsily nursing a bleeding arm with a long strip of bandage.

Neelson quickly came to his aid.

"Dempsey, your little girl's voice is the last thing I want to hear right now." Renquist said. "Rubalcava, report."

Rube filled him in with the goings on while we'd been sending the satellite message. Once he was done, he asked, "What went down here, with you guys?"

"We were ambushed." Renquist said in disgust. "Have one of the others spell it out for you. I need a minute to think."

Rube turned to the next closest Marine. "Well, how about it? What the hell happened to you guys?"

"We were just walking along, minding our own business." Dobson explained. "Didn't smell a thing, didn't see a thing. And boom, just like that, we're knee deep in Roaches."

"Everywhere, man." Brickwell added. "I mean we were in Shit City."

“Like Renk said, it was an ambush.” Dobson continued. “We were a bunch of assholes, just walking into that clearing as if we were walking into a park. All of a sudden, boom. We’ve got Roaches popping up on all sides and firing at us like we’re the little ducks in a shooting gallery.”

“The only reason more of us didn’t meet the reaper was because Dempsey threw himself on the ground like two seconds earlier.” Brickwell said. “His freak sonar went off. Right after that Renquist ordered us all to hit the dirt.”

“Zachs bit the bullet earlier.” Dobson said. “Neelson would have too, because he was standing there frozen like a statue until we dragged his ass down with us. And you saw what just happened to Menden.”

“The old man spotted that cave and we scrambled into it lickety-split.” Brickwell said. Defending his pride, he added, “We were too heavily outnumbered to give them a good scrap.”

“That wasn’t a cave.” Strawberry joined the conversation. “It was something else, something artificial. There were markings on the walls inside, like hieroglyphics, but they were too faded to make out.”

“I saw that, too.” Dobson nodded. “Too bad you weren’t there, Rube. Maybe you could have figured them out.”

Dempsey came closer. “It was a trap, man. It was all a Roach trap! The clearing, the cave, all of it was a fucking trap!”

“Think about it, you dumb ass.” Dobson countered. “If the Roaches had us out in the open, why would they let us get to somewhere where we could hole up? The clearing was a trap, sure as shit, but the cave, that was an accident.”

“What if they were trying to starve us out?” Dempsey suggested. “And that’s why they led us in there?”

“Can I shoot him?” Brickwell asked Dobson.

“I just don’t get how you guys didn’t smell them.” Rube wondered. “We can usually smell Roaches coming from a mile away.”

“Yeah, that was another mystery.” Dobson concurred. “Once we were in the middle of the clearing, we smelled them all right. And the inside of that cave, that place reeked of them, so we know they were inside there, too. But as far as smelling them ahead of time, that didn’t happen at all.”

“Divert southwest by thirty degrees.” Renquist ordered, as he consulted his Global Mapping device. “I want to pick up our original heading of due south later. And let’s keep the chatter down to a minimum while I try to figure out a plan.”

Chapter 4

With only the soft sound of our boots audible, we traveled further into what seemed to be a never-ending forest. The trees were thicker here, tall and tidy. I sensed there was something unusual about them, besides them being gray, of course, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Then it came to me. The forest looked watched after and maintained. As if some massive crew of landscapers had come by recently to trim all the unruly branches and sweep up any trash from among the grass. In fact, for all of the griping the Marines were doing about Lesenia being a rock or a shit-hole, it was very much the opposite. It was like a manicured paradise, from every angle a reasonable person could see it from.

I was still glancing up at the long, palm-like leaves on these particular trees, when I noticed Mason had slung his rifle on his shoulder. The harsh man adjusted a thick and bloodstained bandage around one of his brawny forearms, nearly at the same place where Dempsey's arm was wounded. "What happened to you?"

"Roach got close enough to give me a kiss." Mason grimaced, before he suddenly grinned. "I gave it a kiss, too. It was plasma flavored."

"Marines," Renquist paused. "Let's take a breather. Spread out in a tight circle and keep alert. We're going to brainstorm while we're at it. Maybe you jarheads can help me figure out what the missing X factor is on this stinking planet."

I took a spot beside the trunk of a specimen that was some thirty feet high and only four or five feet around, a single tree away from Rube. I sat down on the ground like the Marines were doing; with my back to the bark and my line of sight split between the circle of soldiers and the rest of the forest.

Before Rube took his seat by the tree next to mine, he came over and bumped knuckles with me. "Back there, man, you did good. You saved my ass."

"Thanks." I said. I was too embarrassed over my earlier failure to linger on the compliment. "What do you think is going to happen next?"

Rube settled onto the gray dirt, facing me. There was no black grass around this tiny section of forest, just a small scattering of purple leaves on gray soil. "Well, we'll have ourselves a little rest stop. I've gotta tell you, I don't think I need it. I still feel like I'm at one hundred percent. I've got energy for days right now!"

"What about the Roaches?"

"I hope they're pretty confused by what just happened. They thought they had the squad cornered, right? And then all of a sudden they're getting hit from the east and the west. Most of them scattered like they always do when they're surprised. When the Roaches regrouped, they had to split their forces toward not just one, but three different locations. I'm just glad we were able to confuse them long enough for the squad to get out of that hill. That was a tight spot."

"What about the other two Marines, Davis and Knotts? You think they got away?"

"I sure hope they did. I hope they got far enough away that they're safe. I hope the only reason we haven't heard from them is because they're out of range of these crappy radios we have in our buckets."

I clammed up, once I noticed that Renquist was listening to our conversation. The Staff Sergeant stood in the center of the circle, looking more haggard than usual. “Does anybody have any further observations?”

“I do, sir.” I spoke up. “This place is perfect, too perfect.”

“Explain.”

“Well, take a look around right now.” I suggested. “There’s not a single branch or leaf out of place. There’s barely any trash on the ground anywhere. Everything looks as if somebody comes by and tends to this whole area on a fixed schedule, like a landscaper at a fancy golf course.”

“We had that one area where we saw all kinds of leaves scattered on the ground.” This came from Strawberry.

“Yeah, but those weren’t old and rotting leaves.” I recalled. “They were still fresh, as if they’d all fallen during the last few days. Just like the leaves on the ground here.”

“We haven’t seen any animal shit anywhere, either.” Brickwell mentioned. “Not to mention any animals. But we know there have to be animals around because the outpost people reported seeing all kinds, and the Explorer Drones took all sorts of pictures of them.”

Renquist pondered this. “By inference, you two are suggesting that we have a sentient form of life on this planet?”

“Be on the lookout for gardeners and shepherds.” Mason quipped.

“I know there’s something else involved.” Renquist agreed. “I can feel it in my gut. But until we run into it, we can’t assess how much of a threat this thing, or these things, are to the future of the human race.”

“Do you really think there’s something else out here?” Dempsey started to shrink away from the forest and toward the small circle of men. “Something we don’t know about? What if it’s like a cloud or something, and we can’t even see it until it’s already on top of us? What if it comes out of the ground?”

“I don’t think so.” Mason shook his head. “If there was anything intelligent in the neighborhood, I think we would have seen it by now. There’s nothing out here except for us, the Roaches and all these stupid trees.”

Rubalcava took up the conversation next. He started telling the others about how it was engineers, and not Battle Roaches, that had attacked us when we’d sent the message. I was only giving him partial attention, as I had my own worries to tame. That’s when I remembered the way the pineapples had gotten out of the way for me.

“Hey, Rube,” I interrupted the Marine. “I saw the pineapples move. I’m willing to bet they’re the intelligent species on this planet.”

Rube glanced over quizzically, but his expression soon shifted to one of discernment. “You know, I think you’re right. These guys are saying that they saw strange symbols inside the round hill they were pinned in. And when we went out to send the radio message, the pineapples were all lined up like a marching column, around another little hill just like that one!

“And I’m still alive, when I should have died from acid poisoning. I kept wondering if maybe Lesenia’s environment was making the painkillers or the congeal cream work better or faster, but I also remember how the pineapple leaves kept sticking to me when Knotts took me through the column. I think those trees did something to me when they touched me. They healed me! I mean, just look at me. Except for all these bloody tears in my cammies, there’s nothing to show that I

ever got hit by shrapnel or poisoned by super toxic battery acid." He pulled on his sleeve and held out his limb for the others to see. "Just look at my arm, it was all battered and bloody just a little while ago, and now it's all better. I don't even know what happened to the shrapnel I got hit with. I don't feel it poking around inside of me or anything. It's just gone!"

"Staff Sergeant, I think those trees are sentient." I concluded. "Maybe they're not as animated as we are, but they might be just as aware."

Renquist didn't appear fully convinced, but he was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"We should investigate those trees." Rube insisted. "Right away, too. Before we get any closer to the outpost. They've got secrets!"

"We can't go back that way." Renquist shook his head. "The forest is probably crawling with Roaches in that direction."

"You said the trees were shaped like pineapples, right?" Strawberry spoke up. "I saw some through a break in the trees, roughly to the east and about five minutes back."

This time, Renquist looked extra thoughtful.

"Forget the trees, man!" Dempsey cried out. "They're nothing! Our first priority has to be to reach the outpost, so we can clear up that Non-Retrieval order and get some back-up out here. We don't need pineapples, what we need is a goddamned regiment!"

"The situation is a lot more complicated than what can be cleared up by a single radio message." Renquist berated the soldier. "The Roaches now have the ability to appear inside of a Unilink Transport, just seconds after a distress call has been issued. They also have the ability to surround us in a way they've never done before, possibly with the aid of something native to this planet. It stands to reason that they already control the outpost. If whatever is helping them is intelligent enough to master the Pulse System, then the entire human race may already be in jeopardy. We have to find out what we're up against or we'll end up disappearing like the personnel at the outpost did. It wouldn't do any good to bring in more Marines when we don't know what's out here yet. You were the one that brought up Betelren Six, remember?"

Like a defeated man, Dempsey said, "Yes, Staff Sergeant."

Neelson, who barely said anything at all, spoke up next. "Roach smell incoming. It's faint but it's there. From the north."

"I'm glad we can still use their rot smell as an early warning system." Renquist mentioned. "On your feet, Marines. Strawberry, take point with a heading of east by northeast, toward the location where you last saw those pineapples. The rest of you form up into two columns."

As we lined up, I took a head count. We had nine people left out of the original fifteen that had entered the transport earlier. The odds were not looking good.

A moment later, we were moving through the trees again, as fast as we dared while keeping our movements and our lips quiet. We all slowed at once, when the odor of Roaches infiltrated our nostrils. Renquist motioned for us to stand tight against the tree trunks. That nervous waiting might have been the most anxious moments of my entire life. I kept imagining the dark swarm galloping toward us, surrounding us and mowing us down with heat rays until we were all dead. And from what I'd heard of the Roaches, the feasting would begin soon after. Thankfully, the odor drifted away a few minutes later, before Renquist started us moving again.

"I hate this planet." Dempsey said, frequently glancing back into the trees to make sure we weren't being followed.

“You hate everything.” Dobson criticized. “Why don’t you give it a rest before you start spooking the rest of us again?”

“Staff Sergeant,” Rubalcava spoke up. “I think more than one Roach nest landed on Lesenia. There’s no way that could have been a random patrol back there. I estimate a hundred Roaches were hiding in the grass where the squad was holing up.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing.” Renquist agreed. “What ambushed us was well above what we’d call a regular patrol. What I’m also starting to suspect is that they were here before we were.”

“You mean before the outpost was set up?” Rube asked. “Wouldn’t the Explorer Drones have seen them when they were scouting out this planet?”

“The Drones are set up to take millions of pictures and thousands of environmental samples.” Renquist informed them. “They have an algorithm that dictates how all the information is prioritized, but it’s not perfect. They can’t tell that those round hills are artificial, for example, because the hills are covered with living grass.

“If a Roach nest was covered up well enough to look like part of the landscape, the Drones would have put the pictures of it way back in their archives. Whoever studied those pictures might have never gotten far enough back to see them. Same thing with your pineapple beings. If the Drones assumed they were vegetation, they would have classified them as such and collected their pictures with a thousand other pictures of the trees out here. The only time the Drones would have put a subject into a higher priority bracket is when the subject showed signs of active animation. That’s why we had an idea of what kind of wildlife to expect out here, because it was moving when the Drone flew by and snapped shots of it.”

“But the Roaches move!” Dobson reminded them all. “And they crap all over the place! The Drones should have at least gotten one shit sample off the ground and identified it ahead of time.”

“Unless the Roaches went underground.” Renquist countered.

“They usually don’t go underground,” Rube mentioned. “They only do that when we’re already in combat with them or when we’ve got them cornered.”

“What if they knew we were coming?” Renquist asked. “What if the Roaches are either intelligent enough or psychic enough to know that sometime in the near future, a bunch of Explorer Drones were going to circle this planet? And what if they also knew that after the Drones left and reported this planet as being extremely hospitable, a human outpost was going to be set up here?”

“They’d set up an ambush.” Rube extrapolated. “Say they wanted to try and figure out how the Links worked. They’d watch and wait until the outpost was fully operational. Then, when the transports were shuttling back and forth with biologists, engineers and scientists, but before a big military presence arrived, they could waltz right in and take possession of the outpost. After that, they could take their time studying our technology. As long as they kept their eyes open for any incoming security shuttles like ours, there wouldn’t be anybody around to stop them. But it’s a big assumption to say that the Roaches could be psychic.”

“Think about Betelren Six.” Renquist replied. “The first Roach nest-ship the human race ever encountered, and it was supposed to fly by the outpost on that planet as a near miss. The nest suddenly shifted gears and turned toward the planet. As a result, we had the goddamned

catastrophe that took place there. Nobody can say for certain why the nest changed directions like it did, but psychic intuition is as good an explanation as any."

"Psychic fucking Roaches?" Dempsey looked ready to cry. "No freaking way, man. We are done for. We are going to die out here!"

"Permission to put Dempsey out of his misery, Staff Sergeant." Mason requested.

"Shut the fuck up!" Dempsey snapped at the much bigger soldier. "You're telling me that either the Roaches do me in or you will? You think that's a fucking joke?"

"Keep talking, you little worm." Mason challenged. "I'm about to stick my foot up your ass so far you'll be tying my boot laces with your tongue."

"You're a goddamned gorilla, you know that?" Dempsey insulted. "You and that ugly uni-brow of yours can get the hell out of my face!"

Mason feigned a lunge, which caused Dempsey to run into the trees. The big man smiled. "You know I've been looking for a new girlfriend, right? I need one with a really big mouth. You just might fit the bill."

"You're an asshole!" Dempsey retorted, keeping pace from about ten feet away.

I turned back to the front of the squad, where the tallest Marine, Strawberry, pointed a short distance ahead.

"There." He said, simply.

Just a little further away, I could see another long, swirling column of pineapple-shaped trees. The far end was wide and spread, the near end was narrow and tight. Just like at the message site, there was an unnaturally rounded hill that the trees seemed to be migrating to. Like the hill where the squad had hidden in earlier, this new hill also had a wide, rounded opening on one side. Incredibly, a cluster of pineapples already stood within the dark mouth.

Rubalcava must have been as antsy as I was upon observing this. "Can you guys see that? Scientific WAG (Wild Ass Guess) here, but I will bet my next paycheck that the hill is some kind of transport!"

The ragged collection of soldiers continued on, finally halting about fifteen feet from the mysterious vegetation.

"Well, here we are." Brickwell announced. "What do we do now? Say hello?" He turned toward the stumpy trees and waved. "Hello, plants. How are you?"

"Dempsey's half potato." Dobson teased. "Let him talk to them."

"Fuck you, Dobs!"

"Dempsey, go ahead and communicate with your people." Renquist ordered. "Make it snappy. We don't have all day here."

Dempsey made a face at his superior, but issued no further comment.

The Staff Sergeant next glanced at Rube. "You want to give it a try?"

The Marine stepped forward and started scrutinizing the trees. "These look exactly the same as the ones we saw at Message Hill. There was no opening in the hill there, though." He tried peering into the mouth of the cave from a few different angles, but the plethora of pineapples barred his way. They were too tightly clustered together for him to approach any further, without rubbing leaves and trees on both sides. "There has to be some kind of switch inside there that they're trying to access."

“I hate to tell you this,” Dempsey cut in. “But your trees don’t have any hands or fingers to be operating any kind of switch.”

Rube looked back and frowned. “You think I can’t see that?”

“Are you afraid to touch them or something?” Dobson observed.

“Kind of.” Rube admitted. “When I touched the trees earlier my fingers got numb. I guess when they touched me they helped clean up all the battery acid and shrapnel out of my system. Davis and Knotts said they thought they were seeing things after touching them, and hearing noises inside their head. So, yeah, I’d say I’m afraid to touch one again. Who knows what they’ll do to me this time?”

Several of the Marines glanced over to Brickwell.

“You guys want me to touch one?” He asked. “All right, I’ll go touch one.” He stepped up to the nearest pineapple, opened his arms wide to embrace its gray, scaly bark and began dry humping it.

“Ooorah!” Mason egged him on. “That’s how we’re going to tame this planet! With our peckers!”

A loud snap caused Brickwell to jump away from the tree. “The damned thing shocked me!” He pointed an accusatory finger at the tree. “No more special attention for you, buddy.”

Recalling Rube’s miraculous recovery, I turned toward Mason and his heavily bandaged arm. “You should touch it. Rubalcava was in a lot worse shape than you are and it healed him up pretty quick.”

“No effin’ way, thank you.” Mason refused.

“So what do we do now?” Renquist asked, throwing his hands up in the air. “We just stand around and wait until these plants sprout mouths, so they can tell us what’s going on?”

For the next couple of minutes, we all stood silent.

“I say we find out if these things are really alive.” Mason broke the quiet with his growl. “Permission to open fire on one, Staff Sergeant.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Renquist’s voice was faster.

“Granted. Marines, fall back by ten yards.”

We all complied with the mandate.

Mason observed our retreat, after which he raised his rifle and took aim at the tree Brickwell had been humping. The Marine squeezed the trigger, giving birth to a flash of plasma and its accompanying whine. The powerful missile exploded a full third of the tree in all directions. A second aimed shot tore a huge chunk from the top. The fragment slowly slid away and tumbled into the black grass. Thick, amber sap began to ooze from the freshly exposed innards of the pineapple and dripped down in several crooked rivers over the gray scales.

The trees directly surrounding the assaulted one raised their leaves high into the air in a sort of collective shudder. This action soon spread out among their entire number like a rippling wave. Right after, and in an incredibly slow, sloth-like pace, the trees at the leading edge of the column further collected into the mouth of the cave. The rumble they caused reminded me of a small tremor from back on Earth.

Mason took aim at a second tree.

“Stop it!” I cried out. The soldier paused long enough for me to run out to him. I grabbed the forestock of his weapon and shoved it toward the ground, where we both began wrestling for control of the rifle. “You’ve made your point! You already killed one!”

How typical of the human species, I considered, that instead of trying to peacefully communicate with a new, sentient species, we were already trying to submit it by force.

“Mason, lower your rifle.” Renquist stepped forward to examine the damaged tree, while the rest of them continued to rumble along. “Well, it looks like we finally found some of our elusive Lesenia wildlife.”

“They’re getting away, Staff Sergeant.” Dobson reminded him.

“The way they’re gathering in that cave, I’d say they’re about to seal themselves up and head somewhere else.” Rubalcava concurred, when he glanced back at the column. In total, the trees might have numbered at around fifty. “Well, some of them are, anyway. They’ll probably have to make about five trips.”

“They might know the only way off this stupid planet!” Dempsey shrieked. “We have to stop them before they get away!”

“You might be right about that.” Renquist stated. “Marines, hold your weapons at the ready. Each of you take a position before one of these plants.”

“They’re scared enough as it is!” I objected. “You’ve put them all in a panic!”

“Do you have a better suggestion, Douglas?” Renquist glared at me.

Since I didn’t want any more of the beings to die, I said, “Let me try to talk to them.”

“They don’t have any ears.” Brickwell pointed out.

“I don’t know, maybe they can hear through their leaves or something.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Rube stated. “Maybe they send out signals with their leaves, since they started moving right after the leaves all went up. Maybe they’re telepathic, too. Davis and Knotts did mention that they were hearing things in their head.”

Renquist looked like he’d bitten into a sour lemon. “Spaceman, the floor is yours.”

Great, I thought. It was up to me to begin communication with a whole new species, one that could possibly be as lethal as the Roaches.

As if I had a purpose, I strode close to the mouth of the cave, where the pineapples were at their thickest. Holding back my fear, I sidestepped between them, brushing against gray bark as I went. While doing this, I noticed some of the upraised purple leaves rustling overhead. I stopped in the center of the column. With a rising dread, I watched as the trees closed up the crooked path I’d just entered through. On all sides, they were closing in on me.

The best approach, I considered anxiously, was probably to put my hand on one. After a deep and nervous breath, I raised both hands and touched two pineapples at the same time. Tiny tingles of electricity soon pricked at my palms and fingers. When this sensation deepened into numbness, I couldn’t take any more and I made the attempt to remove my hands. I couldn’t do it. My hands were stuck to the trees as if adhered by glue.

“We’re not here to hurt you.” I tried to explain, but the quiver in my voice announced my panic. “We’re here as friends.”

In wonder, I watched as the upraised leaves on several trees rustled again, rubbing against one another like the legs of a cricket. The hushed noises they made had to be their language, right?

The great, purple leaves curled downward towards me. I gulped as they descended onto my shoulders and back. Some of the pineapples further away stretched their own leaves through the cracks left by their brethren. These ended up on my arms and head. An exceptionally curious leaf wrapped itself around my eyes. As I tried to fathom what horror would befall me next, I closed my eyes and prepared for the end.

That was all it took for our communication to begin. In my mind, I began to see a cloud of black with forms materializing within it. I saw myself come into being, my face contorted into a mad scream and my body struggling to get away from the black but hardly able to move. Soft waves of warm air began to fall over me. The more they did, the more my fear was driven away. As my brain relaxed so did my body. I felt that the pineapples were producing the tranquilizing effect.

'We are of the ancient void-faring peoples.' I heard a voice speaking into my head, but now I was not afraid of it. 'We came from the farthest reaches of the void as seeds, many, many millennia ago, to pollinate and structure worlds for those who would come after us. We are a collective voice. We speak all as one and one as all. In your tongue, the closest approximation to our name is Wehnteweisell. This we do not want.'

I saw Mason's form materializing beside me, sneering and pointing his gun. The Marine was laughing as he squeezed the trigger and shot apart a pineapple inside my mind, in an obvious exaggeration of what he'd done in real life.

Abruptly, Rubalcava appeared in the black cloud. He looked as apprehensive as I had just a few moments earlier. "Hey, I can see you, Douglas. Can you see me?"

"Yes." I nodded. "We're in some kind of dream-state where the trees can talk to us."

"That's fucking weird." Rube turned all the way around to gauge his surroundings. "I did what you did. I just walked into the middle of all the trees and they covered me up with their leaves." He stepped up next to me and pushed at my shoulder. "You feel solid, too." He glanced down at the weapon still in his grip. "I wonder what will happen if I shoot you while we're in this dream-state?"

"Don't you dare!" I warned.

This made Rube chuckle. "How do we talk to these things? I want them to let me go so I can tell the rest of the squad to join us."

"I don't know. Just ask them, I guess."

"Okay, I'll be right back." He looked up at the blackness, then around at the rest of it. Finally, he gave up looking for a presence. "Hey, let me out, so I can bring the other guys in here to meet you."

I saw Rube suddenly fade away.

I was alone, but only for the next couple of minutes. I saw Brickwell appear next. He gave me a fascinated look, as he started walking around and poking at the black with the tip of his rifle. "This place rocks!"

Dobson appeared next. Although the Marine looked equally amazed, he stayed rooted to one spot. Renquist and Rubalcava came in last.

"The rest of the squad is keeping watch or are too intimidated to join us." Renquist informed the group. "I know that leaving Dempsey and Mason unsupervised is taking a big risk that they

might shoot each other, but I've asked Neelson and Strawberry to keep them apart. What's the word here?"

The other men all settled down. A moment later, the Wehnteweisell made their introduction again, followed by a repeat of Mason's murder of one of their number.

Rube went as far as touching the false Mason's shoulder, before the gloating man disappeared. "He felt real! He felt fucking real!"

'This we do not want.' The Wehnteweisell repeated.

"We're not going to attack you anymore." I spoke up. "We fired on you because we thought you were hostile to us. We are not your enemies."

'We are a peaceful people.' The collective said, as more images began to appear in the center of our little group.

The Wehnteweisell showed us holographic pictures arranged like a slideshow. The images displayed locations all around the planet. In these images, the Marines and I saw beautiful, picture perfect landscapes. We saw a multitude of strange beings tending to the environment. They were all herbivores. We saw treetop dwellers that looked like long-eared gibbons, followed by a grand variety of marvelously feathered and long-beaked fowl. After that came images of scurrying and colorful rodents. Finally, we witnessed a couple of different types of quadrupeds that looked to be about the size of a horse, but appeared to be a hybrid of both horse and double-humped camels.

It was the Wehnteweisell who supervised the cycles of planting, watering and harvesting, they explained through the images. Each animal helped in the care of its own food source, from the large fruits that hung from the tallest trees, to the various small nuts and berries that ripened on the lower lying bushes. It was a perfect cycle, I realized, with the vegetation informing the pineapples of its needs, and the pineapples passing on the information to the animal caretakers. The animals both nurtured and cleaned after the plants whose fruit they would be consuming later.

'For many eons, it was this way. Until the ones you call Roaches came from the void.'

The images before us shifted into that of a Roach nest falling from the stars. The combination nest and starship crashed onto Lesenia, months before the first Explorer Drones arrived. The hull of the nest had overheated severely during its entry into the planet's atmosphere. Fire quickly began to spread onto the heavily wooded area and grasses surrounding the crash site. The Wehnteweisell saw the Roaches fleeing their ship in droves and letting the fire spread unhampered. Being a peaceful and attentive bunch, the Wehnteweisell did not comprehend the Roaches' imperialistic intentions until it was too late.

The pineapples roused up the planet's wildlife and undertook the procedure they normally used when dealing with wildfires. Smaller creatures with nimble hands hurried to pull together drying leaves and vines, and by using tree sap formed waterproof baskets. Quicker animals took the baskets into the hill-transporters. The Wehnteweisell used the transporters to send the animals out to lakes and rivers all over that section of the planet. The bigger mammals were there to fill the baskets with water, to carry the heavy bundles back to the transporters and out to where the fires were. The makeshift fire brigade of birds, as well as the smaller and larger animals, were all working in concert with the Wehnteweisell to subdue the flames. Their biggest mistake was that they'd done all of this under the watchful and calculating eyes of the Roaches. Unwittingly, the

innocent Wehnteweisell had exposed their two greatest assets: their telepathic mastery of the animal kingdom and the transport hills that allowed them to travel around the world at will.

The Roaches wasted no time in corralling many of the Wehnteweisell together. They mercilessly tortured and destroyed hundreds of the beings before the remainder finally submitted to their demands. As a result, much of Lesenia's wildlife now aided the budding Roach colony by seeking out and procuring resources for them. These materials included food and water, plus the precious ores and minerals that the Roaches used to enhance their bio-weaponry and in the building of their nest-ships.

On top of being subjugated and humiliated, the Wehnteweisell were exposed to bacteria and viruses the Roaches had brought with them. Prolonged exposure to the Roaches weakened and plagued the trees. Hundreds more died as a result. This forced the Wehnteweisell to separate themselves between those who had been exposed to the Roaches and those who had not. Whenever the Roaches encroached upon the planet's healthy population, they had no choice but to abandon that part of their world and transport themselves and their dwindling pockets of uncontaminated animals elsewhere.

"They don't know anything about war." I marveled aloud. "Or how to defend themselves."

Then came another, even more monstrous blow, the images related. The Roaches figured out how to combine their psychic abilities with the Wehnteweisell's telepathic powers. They called out to other Roach nests traveling through space and drew them directly toward Lesenia. No less than three additional Roach nests had landed on various corners of the planet.

"I knew it!" Renquist sounded off. "I knew the Roaches were psychic!"

But this wasn't all. In reaching out with their minds to attract the other nests, the Roaches also became aware of the presence of humans in the solar system next to Lesenia's. The Roaches already understood enough of human tendencies and needs to know that Lesenia would make as attractive a habitat for humans as it did for them. They carefully concocted and laid a trap for humanity. The Roaches took their entire operation underground, where they quickly dismantled their nests so that any human explorations would not reveal the Roach presence. Through threats and intimidation, the Roaches forced the Wehnteweisell to direct the animals of that world into erasing as much surface evidence of the Roaches as they could.

The humans would explore the planet and set up an outpost, with eyes toward an even bigger expansion. The Roaches knew this because it was the same thing they were planning on doing themselves, and because in many ways their plans for galactic domination ran parallel to those of mankind.

Birds and animals kept an eye on the newly arrived human beings, reporting their observations to the Wehnteweisell, who in turn passed on the information to the Roaches. The Roaches then decided to start another fire, close enough that the personnel from the outpost would feel threatened, but not close enough that they'd consider it a full-blown danger. The Wehnteweisell were told not to interfere and could only stand helpless as another portion of their world burned down.

The majority of outpost personnel went out to combat the fire. Once they were far enough away, a transporter-hill near the outpost vomited out a great volume of Roaches. They already knew the layout of the camp, information they'd garnered from the animal spies, and they quickly overwhelmed the few personnel left behind. Now in possession of the only means the colonists

had to escape: three Unilink transports and the only location the colonists had to communicate off-planet: the outpost computers and the single Pulse generator, it was a simple matter to surround the remaining humans out trying to halt the fire and subdue them.

"Not good." Dobson commented.

Ever since that moment, and with the help of the Wehnteweisell, the Roaches had been working hard to unlock the secrets of the Pulse System. They already understood the basics of it; how a Pulse could send a small vessel from one star system to another instantly. They didn't comprehend all the scientific principles and technology behind it, or how to figure out what coordinates were necessary to direct the vessel to a certain destination. If they knew these crucial matters, they would have long since Pulsed out to their home worlds to spread the word. Very quickly the Roaches could have started migrating wherever they pleased, all across the universe. The advanced intelligence of the Wehnteweisell, however, had fathomed all the intricate details of the Pulse system much faster.

"Not good at all." Dobson shook his head.

"We're in The Big Suck again." Brickwell agreed.

There was a small stir when Dempsey appeared in the black.

"Holy shit!" The whiny man cried out. "Is this place real?"

"What are you doing here?" Dobson asked. "I thought you were scared of these trees!"

"Mason started chasing me again." Dempsey shrugged. "And since I know he wouldn't follow me, I went in where you guys are."

"Well, keep your trap shut." Renquist said. "And let these plants keep telling us their story." The grim man looked around, but he could not find a specific being to communicate with. He addressed the darkness in general. "You don't have to start from the beginning, just go on from where you left off."

And so they did.

The Wehnteweisell were now realizing that the Roaches did not plan to leave Lesenia, ever. The only chance they had to get rid of the pests was to aid the humans that were fighting against the Roaches.

As it happened, when the Roaches became aware of activity on the outpost computer, a Wehnteweisell was standing by to assist. This was the Purple Haze announcing its imminent arrival. The vessel was redirected to land in a spot where its communications could be cut off, and where Battle Roaches could be sent out to ambush the occupants. The pineapple at the control panel remotely and successfully disabled the vessel's communications system, to give the impression that it was faithfully following orders. But at the critical juncture between one location and another, the Wehnteweisell disabled the coordinates and left the transport in flux.

Suspecting the betrayal, the Roaches tormented the tree until they killed it. Right after, they began dispatching squads of Battle Roaches into the areas where the Purple Haze had most likely Pulsed. Thanks to the efforts of Tennard and me, we'd been able to maneuver the transport to a location the Roaches couldn't reach right away.

This was a short-lived victory, however, as another Wehnteweisell was summoned to take over the outpost computer. This being activated the Emergency Pulse that caused the Purple Haze to vanish and reappear next to the other three transports sitting near the outpost. Spaceman Royce

Tennard was still attempting to send out a warning to the satellite in orbit when the Roaches dragged him out of the transport and killed him.

Later, the scanners at the outpost lit up when I started sending the Non-Retrieval code through the makeshift LRR radio. A transport was fully loaded with Battle Roaches, but the crafty Wehnteweisell overseeing the Navigation Computer Pulsed out the Purple Haze instead. The Haze had half a dozen Roach engineers inside it at the time, who were combing through the instrument panels for clues to their workings. It was these engineers who had engaged the small contingent of Marines on Message Hill.

The Wehnteweisell at the Nav-Com was butchered, and several minutes later, yet another intelligent tree was forced to take its place. This one was also ordered to send a transport out to Message Hill, but instead, it maneuvered the Roaches into bringing the Purple Haze back to the outpost. The transport arrived with its Pulse Magnifiers sizzling. This prompted the Roaches to flee the area momentarily, before the Magnifiers finally whimpered out without so much as a puff of smoke.

Ever since then, the Roaches had been forcing the Wehnteweisell to teleport huge numbers of their warriors all over that side of the planet, in the hopes of running into and vanquishing the small squad of Space Marines. Also, the Roaches were trying to prevent the human soldiers from figuring out a way to communicate with other outposts.

“A Roach platoon exited the hill, a big bunch at a time, and they were getting ready to start patrolling for us when we waltzed right into the clearing.” Renquist realized. “All they had to do was lie down in the black grass and backtrack far enough to let us walk into their trap. That explains why there was no Roach smell until we were right on top of it and why the inside of the hill reeked as well. What happened to my two Hard Chargers? What happened to PFC Davis?”

There was a ghastly image of the ebony soldier, stripped from the waist up, her head and arms missing. A horde of Roaches hungrily fed on her body.

Renquist made a noise that was half regret and half anger. In a more subdued voice, he asked, “What happened to Private Knotts?”

The next image showed the big Marine, unconscious and bloody after a severe beating. He was being dragged by a handful of Roaches that strained with his weight. They put the downed soldier on a woven mat, that one of those camel-horses pulled away and into the nearest teleport-hill. Knotts was now at the outpost, alive and hanging upside down from a suspended cable. Near him were several other surviving but unconscious outpost personnel. It was clear that the small group was being kept alive as bait, since they were out in the open and highly visible, in the hopes that their plight would draw the rest of the Marines out.

“We have to extract that man.” Renquist said.

“Are you serious?” Dempsey squealed. “We can’t just march into Roach Central and pick him up! That’s exactly what they want us to do!”

“I’d do it for you.” Renquist replied, but he quickly reconsidered. “Well, maybe not.”

“Was that a joke, Staff Sergeant?” Dempsey gulped.

“Maybe we can get to him.” Rubalcava spoke up. “How close is the nearest teleport hill to Knott’s position?”

The replying image displayed a bird’s eye view of the small hill, lightly guarded by Roaches. It was located about eighty meters from where Knotts and the other Space Corps personnel hung.

Even worse, there were dozens of Roaches visible, either loitering or scattering about in the prisoner area. We could see their defenses, low mud walls and shallow ditches, as well as everything around them.

"What are they doing?" Rube asked.

The crisscrossing looked random to me as well.

"We can't make it through all those bugs." Dempsey whined. "Man, why did I get out of bed this morning? We are going to die out here today!"

"We're already dead, remember?" Dobson reminded him. "We're Non-Retrieval."

"Staff Sergeant, when you give the order," Rube volunteered. "I'm ready to go."

"Yeah, I'll second that." Brickwell nodded.

"Let's do it now." Renquist tightened the grip on his weapon. "Send us out there!"

'There is something you have not been made aware of.' The Wehnteweisell said.

"What's that?" Renquist asked.

'There will be a Cleansing.'

More images appeared in our midst. Since these were based on events that hadn't taken place yet, they were more indistinct than the previous ones. First was the scene of a broad plain, shortly after sunrise. A long column of some fifty Wehnteweisell was visible. Each tree was spread about ten feet apart. As the sun began to rise in the sky in fast-forward, the pineapples began to wither away. The Wehnteweisell were giving up their life essences, sacrificing them for the planet they loved so much. Their bodies became empty shells. The husks crumpled into yellowing, decaying masses. As the sun reached higher into the heavens, these martyrs began smoldering. Soon, flames were engulfing the entire row.

Working in concert with them, other trees and grasses also dried themselves. The living fire from the Wehnteweisell began to expand further out. The fire became a great, writhing amber and orange wall. It started to pick up speed as it went. It was a directed fire as well, spreading out in a great outward arc. As the group of men watched, the fire aimed itself at the outpost. Like an amber tidal wave, the wall of flames began sweeping across the transports, the tents, the Roaches and the captured humans.

More images appeared, of other, similar fires spreading all over the planet. These fires were aimed at the Roach nests, their budding colonies and material warehouses. Even the underground areas were going to have their entrance tunnels funneled with fire, from several points at once until the heat burned away the oxygen and all the Roaches hiding inside were destroyed. The Wehnteweisell located underground would spontaneously combust as well, burning whatever flammable material was available in an attempt to unite with the fires raging outside.

The Wehnteweisell were aware that the Roaches would start killing their brethren, once the aliens understood the mass destruction the trees had set in motion. The Wehnteweisell were also aware that it was the only option they had that would guarantee that all of the Roaches' diseases would be eradicated, and that the sinister Roach taint would be forever eliminated from their world.

The blaze would continue still, sterilizing any and all places where Roaches had set foot, even to surrounding places where too much of their contaminated air had reached. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile land were reduced into great swaths of dark ashes. The entire planet seemed to be smoldering with smoke.

“Is this happening right now?” I asked in disbelief.

‘By your standards of time, zero-eight-hundred hours is when the flames will reach the outpost.’ The Wehnteweisell replied.

“How much of your planet are you planning on burning?” Renquist wondered.

‘One of four parts.’

“One fourth of Lesenia is going to be destroyed?” Dobson gaped. “What about all the animals?”

Several new images replaced the fiery ones, of massively crowded beasts and birds standing idly on vast plains, some impatiently, as they waited for the Cleansing to be done with. The animals all realized the necessity of the fire. They were waiting for the rebuilding and the replanting to begin once it was all over.

“Less than seven hours, Staff Sergeant.” Rube checked his GPS. “That’s how much time we have to rescue Knotts before the fire gets there.”

“Show me Knotts again.” Renquist requested, looking about ready to lose his cool.

A single image appeared, of the unconscious Marine and the other personnel hanging beside him. Renquist and a couple of others leaned closer to consider one bizarre detail they hadn’t noticed before.

“Why are all these people green?” The Staff Sergeant voiced.

I leaned forward to stare at the image closer, and sure enough, Renk was right.

The image changed to show Knotts being dragged into an underground chamber. I saw a huge vat made of some kind of secretion that looked like dried mucus. It was filled with a sickly-looking green liquid. As we watched, the Roaches stripped the Marine of his cammies and used a large, bowl-shaped frond to scoop up the liquid and pour it all over the soldier’s body. The liquid hardened around Knotts like a shell. Somehow, we knew that Knotts’ bodily functions had been reduced to a state of hibernation.

“What the hell is that for?” Dobson asked.

The scene shifted to a smaller underground chamber. In it, several Roaches had an outpost woman tied down to a leisure chair with vines. Her skin was fully green. Beside the woman stood two pensive Wehnteweisell. The Roaches were asking questions. The Wehnteweisell repeated the questions into the woman’s mind. Incredibly, and even though the woman’s body was in a state of near hibernation, her mind answered the queries.

“They’re interrogating her.” Renquist said. “This is how the Roaches are going to get on the Links, boys and girls, by getting into our heads and taking the information right out of us! And if they make it all the way back to Earth, you all know as well as I do that we are as good as gone as the major players in the universe! Unless we do something right now, we will be the food of choice for these fucking insects!”

The severity of the situation started to sink into all of us.

“We cannot allow this to happen.” Renquist continued. “We will make every attempt to rescue Knotts and the others, but if we can’t, we have to make sure that our knowledge does not end up being used against us! Do you get me, Marines?”

Everyone knew what this meant, except for me. It only dawned on me later that Renk meant to either rescue the prisoners or kill them.

“We get you.” Rube nodded somberly.

"So we pop out of the teleporter," Dobson figured. "We drive the Roaches back, rescue the prisoners and then what?"

"Can we see the transports one more time, please?" Rube asked.

The three plain Unilink Transports came into view, with the oddly colored Purple Haze sitting right beside them. They were located very close to the teleport-hill.

"Douglas, I want you to tell me that at least one of those transports is Pulse worthy." Renk said to me.

I peered as closely at the holographic image as I could. "We know that the Pulse Magnifiers on the One-Twenty-Six are shot. Let's take a look at the rest. Transport two has some visible damage on its side, oh, and look at the hatch. It's bent beyond proper closing. Transport three doesn't look too bad, and number four looks great."

"One of those is going to be our ride home." Dobson allowed himself a smile. "Hell yeah!"

"Oorah!" Brickwell gave him a high five.

"Wait." I stopped the celebrating. "We don't know how much Pulse energy there is in either one of those. They might be empty. Can we see the inside control panels of either one of those two transports?"

'That is not in the collective memory.' The Wehnteweisell replied. 'Our people are unable to leave the ground to move on an artificial surface. We might send a small animal or a bird to enter the vessel and gaze upon it, but this entity may not understand the complexity of the controls.'

"Okay. What about the Pulse Generator? Can you show me that? It would be a big computer sitting inside the command tent."

The large reactor, the size of two Earth refrigerators side by side, appeared next.

"It looks like it's working." I said. "As long as no Roaches shut it off, I should be able to draw power from it and into the transports. And in case we can't Pulse out, I can at least send a better message to CP-1 detailing our situation."

"The teleport-hill is close enough that we can fall back to it if we really have to." Rube pointed out.

"That's a plan." Renquist said. "Rescue the hostages, power up the transport and get the hell out of Dodge before that fire comes knocking at the door. Let's go tell the others."

A few minutes later, the six emerging men were conferring with the three sentries. All were in agreement except for Dempsey, who did his usual bitching and moaning.

"A little over six and a half hours until show time." Rube reminded the Staff Sergeant.

"Just enough time to get some shut-eye." Renquist said. "Douglas, would you mind asking your new buddies to ship us out somewhere far away from any Roaches?"

I did it. A few minutes after, the Wehnteweisell lumbered out of the cave, all except for one. The nine of us took their place.

"Okay," I explained. "They said to step as far back as you can, and to stay away from the mouth of the cave before it starts to close."

"We kinda figured that one out already." Strawberry commented dryly. "But thanks for the heads-up."

Once everyone was inside, I looked back at the lone pineapple that stayed inside. "I guess we're ready."

I was a little surprised when I discovered that I could still hear the thoughts of the Wehnteweisell. The Marines were all chatting among themselves by then and didn't seem to be catching the alien thoughts the same way I was.

I sensed as the tree reached out to the mass of hard dirt all around us. It uttered a short chant in a language I didn't understand, which sounded to me like a quick prayer. This chant started up a process where the entire hill was made to rumble lightly, as if a bunch of the strange pineapples were having a party on top of it. Loose dirt rolled down the sides of the opening, clinging to the edges of the cave mouth and starting to close it shut. The entrance quickly shrunk inwards to become a hole the size of a beach ball, and continued shrinking even smaller until we were standing in complete darkness.

"Like being buried alive." Strawberry sounded anxious.

"This is weird." Dobson said.

"Not weird, this is fuckin' awesome!" Brickwell countered. "It's insane!"

"Uh, we're going to feel lightheaded for a moment." I informed the crowd. "But it should pass soon." I hope, I thought to myself.

The thought of being buried alive scared me. I took a deep breath to try and relax my body. Looking back, I noticed that a couple of Marines had already pulled out small flashlights. I started to wonder what pocket or part of my backpack my light could be in. It was still Finn's backpack, I had to remind myself, and not mine.

It was kind of strange, but I thought I could sense the fears emanating from some of the other soldiers as well. Then, I got the sensation in my stomach of riding down an elevator, but this only lasted for a second or two. This had bothered some of the others, most notably Neelson. Don't ask me how I knew that. I just kind of sensed it.

The hill started to rumble again, and the sound of scurrying dirt could be heard. It was coming from a completely unexpected direction, however, almost directly behind us. The small opening appeared or evolved, I guess. Instead of daylight, we were rewarded with moonlight from Lesenia's multiple moons.

"We must be somewhere on the other side of the planet!" Strawberry blurted out. "It looks like the middle of the night out here!"

As soon as the opening was big enough, and against the Wehnteweisell's cautious directions, the Marines quickly exited the hill. I followed right along with them.

Chapter 5

Platoon 10-20's come to town,
Platoon 10-20's come to town,
Tougher hombres can't be found.
Tougher hombres can't be found.
We're gonna blast some Roaches today,
We're gonna blast some Roaches today,
'cuz Platoon 10-20, we don't play.
'cuz Platoon 10-20, we don't play.
So to any hellbugs on this rock,
So to any hellbugs on this rock,
Platoon 10-20 won't be stopped.
Platoon 10-20 won't be stopped.
Ten! Ten!
Twenty! Twenty!
Ten! Ten!
Twenty! Twenty!
Soldier down behind enemy lines!
Soldier down behind enemy lines!
Platoon 10-20's going in double-time!
Platoon 10-20's going in double-time!
We find our man, we get him out!
We find our man, we get him out!
That's what 10-20 is all about!
That's what 10-20 is all about!
It's time to stand our ground and fight,
It's time to stand our ground and fight,
'cuz at 10-20 it's do or die!
'cuz at 10-20 it's do or die!
Ten! Ten!
Twenty! Twenty!
Ten! Ten!
Twenty! Twenty!

"Hold still a sec." Rubalcava said. He stepped behind me, rummaged through my pack. Half a minute later, he handed me a small flashlight. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

The focused beams of light led us over the cool, dark landscape. I could see plenty of Wehnteweisell all around us as we walked. Some of them were curious enough to stretch their

leaves out to touch us on the arms or back. Rarely did they reach out for our heads, as if they held some sort of special respect for that part of the body.

I hadn't even imagined that there might be little ones, but I came across them every so often. They were only a couple of feet tall. They looked like perfect miniature copies of the adults. As I stopped to shine a light on one of these young ones, it reached out with a nimble leaf and surrounded my hand. I closed my eyes to see if it communicated like the others.

Instead of being immersed in a great black cloud, however, I found myself staring at the black chalkboard of my mind. A two dimensional image came forth. It was a pretty picture of a plain where a soft breeze rustled over a broad stretch of black grass, overlooking a placid lake of soft blue. Several small pineapples gazed over the serene landscape. That was a time of freedom, I understood, before Roaches or humanity had claimed their planet for war.

The image blurred, shifting to another impression where the young pineapple that communicated with me had been standing in a forest. It playfully lifted its leaves in trying to catch the happy and colorful young birds that were flying around teasing it. Whenever the tree managed to catch a bird, it would wrap the bird within its leaves and give it a sort of joyous blessing before it was released. This was considered a form of love, I understood.

'This happy come back?' The young plant asked.

The question was crude, the voice reminiscent of a little boy's, but I got the gist of it. I answered, "Yes. Once the Roaches are gone, you will get your world back."

The scene faded. I sensed an ominous dread sweeping through the young plant before me. A new image rose, of planet Lesenia hosting a huge Space Corps Recruit Station. Big machines came in to level giant patches of trees to build a colony. Later came a city with roads. In the near future, several cities lit up the black expanse of night on the planet's surface. I watched recruits arriving by the hundreds, even thousands, marching, running, doing jumping jacks and brandishing plasma rifles. And I saw war, once these recruits graduated from their training, war among the worlds surrounding Lesenia. The young Wehnteweisell before me conveyed a feeling of deep regret. Slowly, it withdrew its contact with me.

Those last few thoughts were human, I realized. I wondered which of us could be having them, when I heard Renquist's sharp voice slicing through the night.

"Get away from me!" The rough Staff Sergeant snapped, apparently barking at another Wehnteweisell up ahead.

Along with the rest of the squad, I stepped clear of all the pineapples.

Renk was still shouting. "No grab-assin' (horseplay), jarheads. Roll out your fart sacks (sleeping bags) and ree-tire! We are heading out to Fiddler's Green tomorrow, and I want to be prim and proper when I get there."

I pointed my flashlight at Rube while he got his sleeping bag off his pack. A minute later he returned the favor.

"I see that Renquist is all motivated again." I smirked.

"Yeah, that guy's a Hard Charger." Rube nodded, as he tried to find a good, flat patch to lay his bag on. "He prefers a straight-up battle to all this sneaking around bullshit. Once he's got the enemy in his sights, he's a hundred percent again."

"What did he mean when he said Fiddler's Green?"

"Paradise."

“Paradise? We’re heading out to paradise tomorrow?”

“He meant Heaven.” Rube explained. “Some of us may not be coming back.”

The Marines had a morbid sense of humor sometimes, I thought. “Did you catch what Renquist was thinking, just a couple of minutes ago?”

“No. What was it?”

I told Rube about the vision I had, of recruits running all over the planet and wars all over that part of the galaxy. I also told him about the Wehnteweisell’s reaction to that.

“Damn.” Rube muttered. “I really hope the trees don’t turn against us. I hope they don’t roast us like they’re planning on doing to the Roaches.”

“Do you think they might do that? We’re supposed to be the good guys here.”

“Are we?” Rube shrugged. “I sure hope they see us as the good guys. If they want their planet back bad enough to set a quarter of it on fire, I think we’d better play it safe just in case. The Staff Sergeant thinking about colonization and conquering, that doesn’t make the best impression of us. And what happens if they start getting sick from our bacteria, like they already are from the Roaches?”

I dragged my sleeping bag over next to where Rube set his out.

“Three feet apart.” Rube cautioned. “I don’t want your leg draped across my thighs in the morning. Wouldn’t look right for morale and all that shit.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Once I’d set up my bag, I crawled in. I left the zipper open in the event I had to get up right away, as Rube suggested. Renquist barked something about a one-hour fire-watch for some of the Marines, with him volunteering to go first.

“Can you imagine, not having been in a war so long that these beings have lost the concept of what war is?” Rube asked. I clicked the light on briefly to see him lying down with his hands behind his head. “Back on Earth, it’s been one war after another for well over a century. Thanks to the Pulse System, humans have even succeeded in taking war into space. I’m losing the concept of what it is to have peace.”

“The pineapples have no weapons.” I concurred. “They have no defenses. They have no way to prevent an invasive species from coming in and stomping all over them.”

“They have their mental powers.”

“Which they use for nurturing animals and plants, and for maintaining ecological cycles. If they could make something’s brain explode, don’t you think they would have done that to the Roaches by now?”

“Maybe they’re waiting for the right moment.”

“No, they’re not evil beings. They’re righteous, like monks.”

“Yeah.” Rube agreed. “You get the feeling that maybe this planet is a sort of paradise? That just by showing up, the Roaches and us are fucking it up?”

“I’ve been thinking that, a little.”

“Maybe human beings don’t deserve a paradise, if all we’re going to do is fuck it all up.” Rube stifled a yawn. “Try to get some sleep, man. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Maybe Rube was right, I thought. Maybe humans didn’t deserve a paradise. I lay there a little while, before the day’s exhaustion set in and I too drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning, I was awakened to the sound of a buzz saw. Once my head focused on the grating sound, I discovered it was Renquist's raspy voice instead.

"You heard me, ladies!" The Staff Sergeant's shouting gave me instant irritation. "It's show time! Get your butts out of your fart sacks before I start kicking them out. And let me tell you, having a size twelve boot jammed in between your butt cheeks is not a good thing to have!"

A heavy hand began slapping at the side of my head. "Rise and shine, meathead."

It was Mason, fully dressed and going around to make sure everyone was roused.

"I'm awake." I said impatiently. To prove it, I sat up.

Mason turned away and began slapping on Rube's head next. "Time to pack your gear, man. We've got us a battle to fight."

Rube ducked his head further into his sleeping bag. He said, "Mommy, the monster's come back! It's the one from all my nightmares!"

"Fuck you." Mason stood up, before he went to bother someone else.

Like a frightened child, Rube poked his head out to look at me. "Is the monster gone?"

"Yeah." I chuckled.

"Well, all right!" Rube sat up, looking spry. "We've got a fresh set of cammies in our packs. Let's get geared up and ready to roll!"

As I got dressed, I noticed that Dempsey hounded Renquist like a lost child, but twice as loud.

"We've only got nine rifles, and that's if you're counting that Spaceman." Dempsey whined. "And you seriously expect us to take on four Roach nests? Are you kidding me? We should just grab a transport and head out. Once we round up enough troops, we can come back here and launch a major assault on this planet!"

"What if the Roaches aren't here when we come back?" Renquist countered. "What if they figure out how to use the Link System before then and they Pulse all the way out to your family's backyard?"

"The Roaches don't know the coordinates to my family's house."

"That was a hypothetical statement, you asshole." Renk snapped. "Finish getting your gear together, before I put you in charge of retrieving live rounds (flying bullets) for me!"

Mason walked past us, mumbling, "What a rat turd, what a major waste of space."

I watched as the big lout lumbered past, just to make sure he wouldn't slap my head again, before I looked over at Dempsey. Apparently, he hadn't gotten the hint, because he was still hounding Renquist like a dog wanting attention.

I turned to Rubalcava. "What is it with that guy? I mean, the rest of you Marines all bring something to the table, like combat skills or versatility, and you with your theories. But what about Dempsey? What does he provide that makes him worth bringing along?"

"Long story short, he's our good luck charm." Rube explained. "We get ourselves into some real scrapes sometimes. Just when it looks like our platoon is about to bite the bullet, just when things get to their absolute, hairiest worst, Dempsey comes through in the clutch. It's crazy, because he can turn the tide of a battle all by himself. I'll give you some examples.

"One time, the platoon got pinned against a ravine wall and the Roaches were massing up right in front of us. Dempsey went freakazoid like he's doing now. Then he makes like a mountain climber and starts up the side of the ravine. We didn't even see what he was doing until

he was three quarters of the way up. He sets off this rockslide, and a bunch of us barely had enough time to get out of the way. The rockslide keeps on building momentum and smashes right into the Roaches, scattering them all over the place. The Roaches thought we'd started that mess deliberately. They fell back in case we tried to set off another one. This gave us the chance to find a better position to defend from. Some choppers came by a little while later to zoom some rockets up their collective Roach ass. Thanks to Dempsey's rockslide, we got out of that pinch with only minor injuries."

"Another time," Rube continued. "We're under heavy fire again. Dempsey freaks out after a heat blast sets his backpack on fire. He's jumping up and down and slapping at his pack trying to put the fire out. He trips on his own two feet and accidentally pulls the trigger on his Spitfire. It's a one in a million shot, because the plasma bolt goes right into this huge pile of brush we hadn't been paying attention to. What we don't know is that behind the brush is the core of a Roach nest, and this is a highly volatile piece of shit. It blows up, killing all kinds of Roaches in the process. Just like that we have more boots on the ground than they do.

"The guy may look like he's too dumb to tie his own shoes, but I'm telling you, the universe has a crush on him. It has bent over backwards to keep that guy alive and the rest of the platoon right along with him." Rube shook his head. "I just hope he has that same mutant luck with him today because we're going to need it."

We quickly finished gearing up.

"All eyes and ears on me." Renquist called us to attention. "This is the word. We will enter the transport-hill and get shipped out to the location nearest the outpost. Once there, this is how we will organize ourselves. Rubalcava and myself will climb to the top of the hill, both to supervise the situation and to provide suppressing fire. Two teams of two Marines each will simultaneously round the sides of the hill. Mason and Brickwell will head in one direction, while Strawberry and Dobson go in the other. Once we are in position by the side of the hill facing the outpost, Mason and Strawberry will attempt to extract the captured humans, while the remaining four of us will continue to fire and keep the Roaches off those two Marines' backs. If we are unable to extract the captives, we will render them unusable to the enemy."

This time, I knew what that meant.

"While this is going on," Renk continued. "Dempsey and Neelson will escort and defend Spaceman Douglas to the first usable transport. Spaceman Douglas will ascertain the condition of the transports. If one is incapable of operating, he will move on to the next transport in the row. Spaceman Douglas will make every attempt to load the Pulse Magnifiers on one of these transports and have the vessel ready to Pulse out once our main objective has been achieved. We will have approximately forty-five minutes to carry this plan out. Remember, we are under the deadline of an approaching wall of fire from beyond the transport end of the field. If you are not inside the transport with the main body of our squad… You will be left behind, to your detriment."

It was a sobering speech.

"Now, who's ready to make like a hero?" Renquist asked.

"Oorah!" Brickwell shouted.

"Oorah!" All of the others, except Dempsey, Neelson and myself, followed suit.

“Then let’s get this caravan underway.” Renquist directed us toward the transport hill. “To the rock elevator from Hell!”

All nine of us marched into the mouth of the hill. Even though the sun was already starting to rise, the innards of the hill were still as dark as a cave. Without our flashlights in hand to guide us we barely kept from bumping into one another.

“Move further back, Dempsey.” Dobson complained. I could hear him slapping the other soldier’s pack. “You’ve got plenty of room.”

“I have to be one of the first ones out.” Dempsey protested. “I have to help secure the transport.”

“You mean you have to go hide in the transport.” Dobson pushed him further inside. “Move your ass!”

“Let’s keep it tight.” Renquist said. “Nuts to butts.”

“That’s what Mason likes.” Dempsey insulted.

“Where are you, little man?” Mason’s voice growled. “I’ll show you some nuts!”

“Mason, Strawberry, I want both of you up front.” Renquist tried to break the friction between his men. “Packs on the floor, grenades and extra plasma clips at the ready.”

“We’re all inside, Staff Sergeant.” Strawberry commented, as we dropped our bulky gear on the ground.

A solitary Wehnteweisell slowly crept into the cave mouth, laboriously pulling itself away from the black grass and onto the gray soil. It wasn’t as tall as the others, as it stood at about three feet high if you didn’t include the leaves. I wondered if maybe this one was an adolescent. In my mind’s eye, I could almost see the short tendrils that the creature used to propel its form along the ground.

“Do you think they’ve started that fire yet?” Rubalcava asked.

“They’d better have.” Brickwell replied. “Once the Roaches see the smoke from that thing, it’ll scare the living crap out of them. I bet they’ll abandon the entire outpost trying to get away from it.”

“As long as we don’t get caught in the blaze, I’m all for it.” Dobson related.

In my head, I could already see the fire. It was a giant wall of flames, impossibly high at twenty to thirty feet. It raced along the fertile landscape at an unbelievable speed. Gulping at its intensity, I saw the destruction, complete and unforgiving, that the flames left in their wake. Scorched, blackened ashes were all that remained of the previously lush landscape. Everything combustible was gone. Even the surfaces of boulders had been charred. It looked as if the hand of God was sweeping across the planet.

I glanced around, but nobody else seemed to catch the same visions I did. Simply, I said, “The fire has started.”

“How do you know?” Dempsey asked.

“Cut the chatter, jarhead.” Renquist said. “I think he’s right.”

It was as if the Wehnteweisell had opened up some part of my brain and they’d forgotten to shut it off. Wondering what else I could catch a glimpse of, I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to roam freely.

My thoughts centered on the young Wehnteweisell at the cave mouth. Emotions of anxiety and fear were exuding from the being's mind, of the horrors of war that the naive creature had recently been exposed to. It felt a gnawing dread that it was about to die.

The Marines around me, they were having their own thoughts as well. These were images of their particular version of home or the faces of their loved ones. Some of the men thought about their achievements or their disappointments. A few images were so strong I was able to pick out who was thinking them.

I saw Staff Sergeant Renquist, who had been obsessed with emulating his cold and heartless father, a strong military man like him. In this bitter man's life, there was Marine Division and nothing else. Without this drive there would only remain an empty void. I saw Mason's thoughts as well, past the cruel and tough exterior, back to a time when he was married and fathered two children. Now, he was a divorced drunk and prohibited from seeing his offspring. From Mason's own mind, I could see that he'd become as bitter as Renquist. Dempsey's head was a confused tangle of knots; he wanted attention, he wanted glory, but he wasn't secure enough to push his worries away or relaxed enough to become his ideal self. His fear was becoming strong enough to infect me. When I realized this was happening, I pushed him and the rest of the Marines out of my thoughts.

I reached out to the Wehnteweisell again, sensing its joyful memory of how it had been assigned to watch over a tiny nest of bat-like birds. By chanting to them, it eased the young birds' anxieties, as the parents flew off to acquire their nourishment. It made the Wehnteweisell happy when it sensed that the babies considered the tree to be a third parent. Then came the day when the Roaches arrived, when this young pineapple had been torn away from its task and enslaved into the vast, living machine that now served the cruel Roach masters. It understood well why such a large portion of their planet was being sacrificed. It also wondered if it would ever see those bat-birds again. Then the pineapple hummed a short song, more symbolic than essential, some sort of established ritual, before it moved on to the task it had been given.

As I stood there among the creature's innermost thoughts, I could feel it reaching out with its mind as it hummed. It scanned along the inner surface of the cave, reaching far into the hard dirt to an ancient circuitry that lay embedded within. There were hidden, narrow circuit boards there, built untold eons ago by long forgotten space travelers. The circuits were formed from such an extremely advanced design that the technology was able to both analyze and repair itself. The transport-hill had far outlasted its original designers, so that not even an ancient race like the Wehnteweisell could recall who the actual builders were or what they looked like.

Into these panels, the young Wehnteweisell's mind reached, to the liquid metal switches that could be activated by the electrical impulses of the tree's mere thoughts. I watched as the liquids flowed from one juncture to another, only a tiny fraction of space apart. This triggered the entire inside of the hill into trans-dimensional operation. The physical integrity of the cave entrance changed, becoming almost fluid. Its new properties allowed the softened dirt to flow together to seal the entrance shut.

The circuitry switched into its next phase and the cargo of nine humans, plus one big-ass pineapple, was instantly transported to a location many thousands of miles away. Our group was moved into another transporter-hill, built exactly like the one we'd left behind. Strangely enough, I understood that several hundred such hills existed all over the planet.

The hard dirt wall began to disintegrate, once again from an unexpected direction. A strong shaft of sunlight pierced into the darkness of the small cave. The sunlight was on a level plane with the hill's mouth, blinding us temporarily as the opening enlarged into its usual dimensions.

Just as our eyes finished adjusting, we saw the distortion of air from the Roaches' heat beams, heading right for us. Mason and Strawberry had been shuffling forward to exit the cave as they'd been directed to, but only Strawberry managed to jump out of harm's way.

Mason grunted as the two separate heat beams jarred his body from opposing directions. Their combined fury caused the soldier's frail flesh to explode into the cave. Even as far back as I was standing, bits of muscle and bone slapped into my face. One human fragment even made it into my mouth as I opened it up to gasp at the atrocity.

The young Wehnteweisell, unable to move that quickly to begin with, exploded a second after.

"It's an ambush!" Rube cried out. "Everybody down!"

"No!" Renquist refuted, instantly angry at Mason's loss. He ran up the edge of the opening. "I only see a handful of them, hiding out there among the transports. Move out now, Marines, before they mass up against us! I'm taking Mason's place!"

"I've got you covered, Staff Sergeant!" Brickwell threw himself on the ground, square in the middle of the cave opening.

With some dismay, I watched the Marines begin to fire in the direction of the transports. Renquist made it out, followed in the opposite direction by Strawberry. Both Dobson and Brickwell stepped up to take their places. I grimaced when I heard a grenade going off, again in the direction of the transports.

Rubalcava moved forward, gauging the situation quickly. "Two Roaches left! The rest of you are going to have to deal with them. Brick, Dobson, let's go!"

The three Marines disappeared around the edges of the cave.

Dempsey took a spot at the edge of the cave mouth. I jumped over to the opposite side. The two remaining Roaches were both standing and firing at the Marines who'd just exited, but their heat rays were falling short. I watched as the normally uneasy and frantic soldier steadily aimed, popped off a shot, aimed and popped off a second shot. Both Roaches were down a fraction of a moment later.

Dempsey lowered his weapon and laughed in disbelief. "Did you see that shit? You have to tell the guys when they get back, because they aren't gonna believe me! Two shots, two kills, man! That was fucking incredible!"

I hardly believed it myself. I glanced back into the cave, noticing that Neelson had not budged from his spot. "Are you ready for this?"

Neelson nodded unconvincingly.

Dempsey stepped out and looked to either side. "We're clear! Let's go!"

He led the charge, with me following close behind and Neelson a longer distance back. We covered the twenty or so yards in record time, when Dempsey quickly jumped into the third of the four transports ahead of me. Just as I was about follow him in, he jumped back out and we both ended up on the ground.

“Sorry, man!” Dempsey scrambled to his feet. “They took out a bunch of panels and wiring and shit on this one!”

The Marine bolted past me and ran toward the next transport over.

I stuck my head inside, in case the transport was still functional, but it wasn’t. A lot of its control panel had been taken apart by force. As I headed toward the next transport, I noticed that slowpoke Neelson was barely arriving. For some reason this infuriated me. Dempsey could be labeled the chicken-shit of the outfit, or even me, but the thought that there was someone even more cowardly than the two of us pissed me the hell off.

“You have to keep up with us!” I shouted, but even so I quickly left him behind.

Dempsey stuck his head out of the last transport’s hatch. “This one’s good, man! You can fly us out of here!”

I went in and looked. The control panel was sound. Everything else looked in order. Then I looked up at the Plasti-Shield.

“Let’s go, man! Start this bitch up!” Dempsey urged.

I pointed at the thick window, where a bolt of plasma had very recently struck the plastic and cracked it. “If we try Pulse off-planet, the window will collapse and we’ll die. We can only Pulse on-planet.”

“Mother-fucker!” Dempsey screamed. “What good is that gonna do? The whole fucking planet is on fire!”

“What?”

“Don’t you get it?” Dempsey cried out. “These pineapple fucks, they don’t want us here! They want to get rid of us just like they’re getting rid of all the Roaches! They’re going to burn this whole planet to shit! And not just a quarter of it, either. I mean all of it! They’re burning the entire fucking planet!”

I thought back to that young Wehnteweisell that had accompanied us into the hill, the one who had been splattered all over the place beside Mason. They had chosen that one because it was a young one, and because the rest of the trees hadn’t told it the entire plan. This way, none of the humans could mentally gather information from it that it hadn’t been given. We’d been set-up by a bunch of plants, I realized. It was only through Dempsey’s uncanny intuition that we found out ahead of schedule.

“You’re right.” I chuckled nervously, as my own psychic intuition kicked in. “They’re going to burn the entire planet.” I glanced out the window but the angle was wrong. I couldn’t see the flames from there. “Not only that, but they lied about the timing too. The flames are going to reach us a lot faster than we figured.”

“Fucking great! What do we do now?”

“I guess we die like rats.” I said, but just having this thought made me angry. Angry enough to lash out at the next thing that dared to step in front of my face. “Or we can die like Marines!”

Like a scared rabbit, Neelson stood before the hatch, timidly clutching his rifle.

“Move!” I yelled.

Once he did, I jumped out. I started to run back toward the hill.

“Where are you going?” Dempsey called out after me.

My strides didn’t falter, nor did my fury. As I reached the entrance of the transporter hill and witnessed the gore that was once Mason, I remembered the radio built into my helmet. I pulled

the microphone end out near my mouth and activated it. “Staff Sergeant Renquist, this is Spaceman Douglas!”

“Go ahead.”

“All transports are out of commission.” I said, feeling even angrier than before. We’d tried every option, and every single time the door had been slammed right into our faces. “Repeat, all transports are a No Go! Also, the Wehnteweisell are planning to burn up the entire planet, not just a fourth of it. They will be burning all of us right along with it!”

“Well, ain’t that just beautiful?” Renquist sounded as if he was laughing. “You hear that, jarheads? Planet Murphy’s Law has pulled out all the stops on us this time! Fiddler’s Green, here we come!”

“What’s the word, Staff Sergeant?” This sounded like Dobson.

“We will proceed with the extraction.” Renquist’s voice sharpened. “And we will give these Roaches one hell of a send-off! Dempsey, Neelson, Douglas, won’t you come up front and join the party?”

I slid the mike shut, so it would be out of my way while I cursed.

“Our goose is cooked!” Dempsey came to a stop beside me. He was panting as if he’d just run back from the transport.

“Where’s Neelson?”

Dempsey turned back, but the last Marine was nowhere in sight. He looked to me and shrugged. “Praying in one of those transports, probably. What are we going to do?”

“I guess we go and back up the others.”

“There’s no point!” Dempsey replied. “We’re all going to die out here anyway! What does it matter if we get Knotts and the others or not, if we’re all about to be part of the biggest barbecue the universe has ever seen?”

“You can stay here if you want.” I said, checking the tiny readout on the plasma rifle in my hands. I still had plenty of ammo left. Without another word, I left him behind.

I’d rounded about fifty feet of the hill, when I caught sight of Brickwell. He was leaning tight against an outcrop of dirt and firing almost without taking a pause.

“Douglas here.” I announced as I got in closer. “What’s the situation?”

“We are in the Galactic Suck of Ages.” Brickwell cursed. “That first skirmish near the transports warned the rest of the Roaches over on this side. A bunch of them were on their way to investigate when they ran into us. Now, there are so many of them firing at us that we can’t budge but an inch a time.”

“Where’s Renquist?”

“About forty feet ahead.” Brickwell informed me. “He’s hiding behind a short dirt wall. That’s part of the defenses the Roaches were setting up, but Renk got to it before they could. He’s pinned down, though. That wall’s been getting nailed non-stop.”

A cloud of dirt exploded from the hillside, just a couple of feet above Brickwell’s head. Crumbs of gray dirt showered down on the two of us.

Brickwell moved back by a few inches. “They’re getting a little ballsy, now that they know there’s only about five rifles firing at them.”

“What can I do?”

“Do you know how to use a flash grenade?”

“Yeah. We threw a live one back in recruit training.”

“Well, you’re about to throw a live one again.” Brickwell replied, quickly taking off the belt around his waist. “Unless you think you can shoot better than I can.”

“I’ll take the grenades.”

“Okay, set them for five seconds. Jump out, toss them and jump back. Do it that quick or else you’re burnt toast. If you’re still holding a live grenade when you jump back, you’ll be taking me down with you. We don’t want that, okay?”

The landscape was teeming with Roaches, I observed. “Where do I aim? They’re everywhere!”

Another section of dirt detonated, cutting Brickwell’s refuge in half.

“We’re going to have move back if we don’t do something right now!” Brickwell cried out. “Just aim anywhere you see a large bunch of Roaches!”

I unclipped one of the tennis ball-sized grenades from the belt and activated it. The device had a good weight to it, I realized, as I set its small timer to five seconds. The timer’s countdown only began once I pressed a red button with my thumb. I could do this while I positioned myself to throw.

I slipped back by about four feet, jumped out into the open, and pressed the button as I launched the grenade. Without waiting, I jumped aside and onto the ground, then rolled as close to the hill as I could get.

When the grenade went off, Brickwell stood up straight and fired about half a dozen shots, then crouched back to his previous position behind the crumbling outcropping. “That was good! Toss ‘em another one! Right down their throats!”

Another grenade blast could be heard from the opposite side of the hill.

“I’m glad somebody’s still alive over there.” Brickwell commented.

I set the next grenade, just before mounds of dirt started erupting only a handful of feet from me. I couldn’t move any closer to the hill because my back was already on it. The heat blasts were getting too close for comfort.

“We’re going to have to pull back!” Brickwell said. “We don’t have anything big enough to drive off the Roaches! We need some kind of massive diversion!”

A diversion? An idea suddenly popped into my head. “Do you have a GPS tracker?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me have it!” I took the device the moment Brickwell held it out to me, quickly finding the app that would allow it to act as a beacon. I sure hoped the Mapper was as sturdy as it looked. “Okay, I’m tossing a grenade out to, uh, about nine o’clock, to drive back the Roaches coming in on the left. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

I jumped out and tossed the grenade, then got out of the way as three heat blasts started ripping up the ground beside me. In my head, I counted down the five seconds. Once I heard the grenade go off, I jumped out again and tossed the GPS tracker directly over Brickwell’s head. It landed about a third of the way between the hill and the hanging prisoners.

“Was that my tracker?” Brickwell asked. “You know those things don’t blow up, right?”

I didn't answer, because I was already running full throttle away from him. As I ran, I pulled out the helmet's microphone stick, sure that everyone was listening to my heavy breaths as I fled the battle. "This is Spaceman Douglas! I have one major league diversion coming up, but you have to hold your position for about four minutes!"

"What are you up to, Douglas?" Renquist came through.

I slid the mike out of the way as I ran around the hill. I paused near the cave mouth when I saw Dempsey standing just inside. He was jumpy enough to point his weapon at me.

"Shit! I thought you were a Roach!" Dempsey said. "I almost shot you!"

"What are you doing back here?" I asked, suddenly irate that he wasn't helping.

"Waiting to die, I guess."

"Do you want to be a hero today?" I asked. "Right now?"

Dempsey's face showed confusion, but I didn't have time to wait for him to make up his mind. I started racing toward the transports.

"Wait!" He shouted, but I didn't stop. Whether or not he joined me, I was going through with my plan.

I made a beeline for the last transport and jumped into its hatch. In two more seconds, I was glancing down at the control panel and activating switches. The Pulse Magnifiers were all at fifty percent or so, which was good enough for what I had in mind. I activated the Nav-Com and linked up with the outpost computer. After that I scanned the local area for the GPS beacon.

Dempsey jumped in through the hatch. "What are you doing? I thought you said this thing couldn't fly?"

"Not off-planet." I answered. "If you want to help the others, shut the hatch."

Surprisingly, he did.

The Nav-Com beeped when it located the beacon, and I entered its coordinates as my destination. Quickly, I adjusted the transport's landing orientation. I had the sudden thought to change the elevation to plus ten feet. In quick sequence, I activated the four Pulse Magnifiers.

I pulled my mike back out. "Diversion coming up in twenty seconds! When this happens, I want you to cease fire! Repeat, cease fire when the diversion starts and resume once you have seen my location! Do not fire until after you've seen where I am!"

"We're the diversion, aren't we?" Dempsey asked from behind me.

"You want to get out, now's your chance."

"No." He shook his head. "We're going out in a blaze of glory, right?"

"Probably." I nodded, as I checked the transport clock. "Have a seat on the bench for a second. Diversion in three, two, one, and… zero!"

I pressed the Pulse Activate button. We were enveloped in the familiar super-bright sheen of a Pulse. Since the distance was so short, one Pulse is all it took.

The transport's glow, appearing suddenly and ten feet high in the air, caused the Roaches to pause their actions and turn away from the glare. A few of them had already made the instinctive decision to scatter back to a safer distance and see what the hell was going on. When the transport dropped down and smashed into about twenty of their fellows, the resultant crash and squealing from their maimed compatriots made even more of them want to take a very long step back, and they did so in droves.

Inside the transport, both Dempsey and I had neglected to use our security belts, so we got a good jarring as well. We were soon scampering for the hatch. Once we'd shoved it open, we were privy to a scene of five courageous Space Corps Marines driving back at least one hundred enemy combatants.

"Good deal, Douglas!" Renquist sped past me, right before Dempsey and I leaped out to join the chorus of plasma fire.

Strawberry was ahead of Renk, and nearly at the tiny grove of trees where the captured humans were strung up. With his field knife in hand, the tall soldier jumped up and hacked at the thick cords that held them aloft, causing them to tear and bringing the entire bunch plummeting down to the ground. Renquist was soon at his side. The two men began patting the green-dyed humans roughly enough to figure out if they were alive or not.

"They're already starting to come back!" Rubalcava's voice screamed through my helmet radio. "Eleven o' clock and three o'clock!"

Heat rays began bombarding the small grove of trees, setting them on fire, hampering the rescue effort briefly before our return volley allowed Renquist and Strawberry to start back. Each of the two Marines had a person dragging on an arm. Dempsey and I rushed over to relieve them of their loads, although we struggled to walk with the overwhelming burdens. Both Renquist and Strawberry went back for more people.

In horror, I witnessed as the two rescuers propped one unfortunate up against a tree. As they moved on to free the next captive, heat missiles struck the dazed and helpless man. Just as Mason had minutes earlier, that man burst into a gruesome red and orange spray.

The vision of carnage was still vivid in my mind, as Dempsey and I hurried our heavy loads toward the transport. We dropped them right in front of the hatch. By their arms and legs, the two of us dragged them inside, one at a time. Just as we finished up Renquist and Strawberry came by with another four. Knotts was the most coherent of these. Although much dazed, the big man was able to make it inside the transport by himself.

"That's the last of them." Strawberry said, once all of the personnel were inside the vessel. Are you sure we can't ship out on this thing?"

"Positive." I shook my head. "The front window's cracked. We wouldn't survive the compression through space."

"Then we get all of us somewhere safe." Renquist said. "Somewhere as far away from this outpost as possible. A place where the fire has already gone by."

"It's not safe!" Dempsey protested. "This whole planet isn't safe!"

"Why not?" Renquist asked.

"It just isn't!"

The answer popped into my head, as soon as Dempsey said that. "Multiple waves. The Cleansing fire is going to take place in multiple waves, because the Wehnteweisell aren't going to risk any bacteria surviving just one pass."

Renquist took this in stride. "Where is it going to be safe? Dempsey, do you know where?"

"I have no idea, Staff Sergeant!" Dempsey was whiny all over again.

"Take a guess, god damn it! Use your freak power!"

Dempsey threw his hands up in the air. "I don't know, maybe the hill we just used to come out here. I can't think of anywhere else!"

Renquist shook his head and grimaced. “That’s still in the path of the fire, but it’s the best idea we’ve got. Douglas, maneuver this transport as close to the teleport-hill as you can and get all of these people inside of it!”

“That’s bullshit!” I balked. “I’d rather try to teleport between the waves of fire.”

“The Pulse Generator is going to be melted after the first wave.” Renquist returned. “You’re going to run out of Pulse power, unless this Great Fucking Cleansing is finished in one wave or two. Take these people to the hill and that’s an order! We’ll try to hold the Roaches back until the captives are all inside.”

Renquist was right, I thought. If I tried to Pulse more than a time or two, depending on the distance, the shuttle would be too low on energy to do it again. I had no idea how many Wehnteweisell were willing to sacrifice themselves in order to destroy the Roaches, or how many waves of fire they were willing to start up to get us off-worlders away from their planet.

Chapter 6

Renquist and Strawberry hurried outside while I rushed over to the controls. “Dempsey, get the hatch!”

A second later, I heard it slam shut. I pulled up the coordinates where the shuttle had been parked previously, and halved the distance between that spot and the teleport-hill. I shifted the coordinates slightly so that when the flames reached the transport’s Pulse Magnifiers, the side of the hill and the transport itself would buffer the resulting explosion and not let it enter directly into the hill unhampered. It was a fairly pointless gesture, as we still had the planetary fires and the other exploding transports to worry about, but I was grasping at any straw I could think of.

The Magnifiers were running low. I quickly snapped them all awake even though the regular procedure was to fill them up one at a time. I wasn’t going across the galaxy, only to the opposite side of the hill, so I didn’t need as much energy for such a short trip.

“More Roaches spotted at one o’clock.” Rube’s voice came over the radio.

I glanced out the cracked window, where sure enough I could see them massing up out there. I hoped the Pulse Generator worked faster than their next charge.

Before I became unnerved by the threat, I turned to look at the inside of the vessel. We had seven green-skinned people lying on the benches and floor, three women and four men, and one green Knotts sulking by himself in a dizzy stupor. They were all stripped naked except for their underwear.

Dempsey looked over the women. “I’ve never seen green tits before. You know why they left the underwear on these people, right?”

“No.”

“The Roaches can’t stand the smell of our piss.” Dempsey revealed. “We’ve caught a few of them before. When we pissed on them, it made them go ballistic every time.”

I was about to ask the man what had compelled the Marines to piss on the Roaches in the first place, when something like a hammer blow smashed into the front of the transport. Instinctively, I ducked down from the impact.

“They’re blasting us with heat.” Dempsey said, leaving his own hasty crouch to take a look outside the window.

I went and checked the Magnifiers, finding them all to be at least at forty percent.

“They’re not as full as I would like them to be, but here goes.” I said, right before I pressed the Pulse Activate button.

Another heat wave smashed into the heavy window, causing me to jerk my head back. Thankfully, the heavy plastic held. A moment later the Pulse engulfed us.

Dempsey opened the hatch the instant the Pulse began to subside. He glanced back at the live cargo we were about to unload. “We don’t have a stretcher around here, do we?”

“Probably, but we don’t have any time to look for it. Where the hell is Neelson, anyway?”

Dempsey shrugged, as he took the legs of the survivor closest to the hatch. “I don’t know. He grabbed his pack and disappeared right after you took off running earlier.”

Between the two of us, we lugged the first heavy load out and across the thirty or so feet to the cave entrance. We deposited the guy just inside the entrance, but if Neelson was hiding in there neither of us could see him.

By the time we got back to the transport, Knotts was doing his best to escort his own survivor back. Since the man Knotts helped was upright and slightly coherent, we didn't take over for him. Instead, we grabbed the next unconscious body in line, which to Dempsey's delight was a female. She was a lot lighter to move than the first guy, so we were soon on our way back for the next one.

"I'm getting pressed over here." Brickwell announced on the radio.

"Fall back a little." Renquist answered. "Douglas, how about you get that transport back up here? Let's give these Roaches a fireworks show they'll never forget. Make sure the ass-end of the transport is facing toward the hill while you're at it."

I scrambled inside and looked at the dashboard. The Pulse Generator at the outpost was still active, I noticed, but the Magnifiers were all at less than twenty percent. I pulled my microphone stick out. "I need at least five minutes to replenish."

"You've got the time." Renquist replied. "Now that the captives are out of the way, all we have to do is keep the Roaches busy until you get here. They're holding back right now, in case we have any other nasty surprises for them."

Dempsey helped me get the rest of the outpost personnel outside, and about fifteen feet away from the shuttle so the Pulse wouldn't singe them. By the time we'd done this, the Magnifiers registered over thirty percent. It wasn't great, but once I'd rerouted auxiliary power I could work with it.

"Ready to launch." I announced to Renquist.

"Modify coordinates to ten meters closer to the hill than your previous landing, and see if you can find me some duct tape."

"Copy." I replied.

After shuffling through some metal cabinets of odds and ends, I soon had the requested item in my hand. I went to close the hatch, observing Dempsey and Knotts lugging away another unconscious man from the group lying on the ground, before I made my way back to the controls.

Into the mike, I said, "Transport incoming."

The Pulse took me nearly to the edge of the hill. When I opened the hatch, Renk was standing just outside. He snatched the roll of duct tape from my hand and hurried to the rear of the transport, where he started taping thermite grenades to the Pulse Magnifiers.

Rube's frightened voice broke through the radio. "Mass charge incoming, ten o'clock through two o'clock!"

"That's a suicide charge." Renquist said, hurriedly setting the timers on the grenades. "Now that the Roaches know we're not getting any new troops from this transport, they're going to try and roll over us like a tidal wave. We've only got five minutes to get to safety, Spaceman, before this thing goes off!"

Hammer blows began smashing at the front and sides of the transport.

"Let's move!" Renquist said.

We fled using the structure of the vessel as cover. All around us, big geysers of gray dirt and rock shot up from the relentless attack the Roaches were perpetrating on us.

A loud groan from the radio caused the two of us to look at the top of the hill where Rubalcava had been positioned. All we saw up there was half a dozen clouds of scattered dirt.

"Rube, are you there?" Renquist barked into his mike. "Rube?"

No answer came back to us.

"Fifty meters and closing!" Dobson's voice cried out.

A second later, another distressed voice came over the radio. "This is Brickwell! I just got hit by debris! My leg's tore up! I can no longer hold my position!"

"Your proverbial shit-fan has just been turned up to full speed." Renquist growled, before he addressed the mike. "Calling all jarheads! It is time to head back to the teleport-hill! Ree-treat! Do you hear me, Marines?"

A pitifully few voices answered: Dobson's and Strawberry's.

"You're going to have to get Brickwell to safety, Douglas." Renquist told me. "I'll hold them off as long as I can."

I glanced down the field, my eyes widening when I saw the massive wall of Roaches scurrying toward us on all six legs. The ground teemed with their dark shapes.

"Are you crazy?" I asked. "You can't hold back all of them!"

Renquist made sure his plasma rifle still had a good charge on it. "I know. I'm planning on setting off the fireworks early." He looked at me evenly. "Go. I know I was meant to die here, and believe it not, I dreamed it would happen like this. You've got some other kind of destiny to fulfill, so get the hell out of here!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but Renquist was already stepping past me, taking aim and firing away. Against the rushing wall of Roaches, he was hitting one every single time, but he was only knocking them aside by blasting at their hard shells as they galloped at us.

I walked away slowly with my first few steps, as my mind calculated how many seconds it would take for the Roaches to overwhelm Renquist. Half a minute, I projected. Although I hated to leave the courageous man behind, I knew that if I didn't move right away both Brickwell and I were going to suffer a similar fate.

A moment later I was running. Clods of dirt were bursting at my heels and right in front of me. I vaulted a low mud wall, just as several Roach rays struck it and caused it to explode up and into me. I landed hard, almost winding myself. As I scampered away again, I couldn't help but take one last look at the Staff Sergeant.

"Come and get me, you bastard horde from Hell!" Renquist shouted at the black mob.

He was standing up, away from any cover, and so help me, laughing out loud as the incredible Roach army surged forward to meet him. Ripples of super-heated air could be seen flashing by on all sides of him. I shuddered as one slammed into Renquist's side, and shoved him down onto his back. Had it hit him squarely...

I started running again, rounding the corner of the hill and spotting what little remained of the dirt outcrop Brickwell had been using as cover. The man was dragging himself away on the ground, some twenty feet further on. He had a bloody, makeshift tourniquet wrapped around one thigh.

Upon seeing my approach, he asked, "Where's Renquist?"

"Back there." I replied, as I grabbed the fallen man and forced him to his feet. "Let's move!"

“Is he… is he gone?” Brickwell asked, when we started moving away from the approaching throng. His microphone was still pulled out, giving everybody wearing a helmet the bad news.

“Hell no, I’m not gone!” Renquist’s grating voice came across the radio. Perhaps for the first time, I was actually glad to hear it. “I hope you jarheads are back in that little gopher hole by now, because I’m about to give these hell bugs a one way ticket to oblivion!”

I was still dragging Brickwell, with Brickwell hopping frantically on one leg, when I heard the worst sound I’d ever heard in my life. It was the sound of the Pulse Magnifiers detonating, followed closely by the wrench of screaming metal. The impact wave threw us ten feet forward, even though we were nearly to the far side of the hill by then. The blast was followed by a wave of scorching heat and radiation that made us feel as if we were being cooked alive.

A rain of rock, dirt and shrapnel began tormenting us, but neither of us could hear it as the blast had left us both deaf. I started bringing Brickwell back up, when the welcome forms of Dobson and Strawberry appeared and grabbed him for me.

Something heavy smashed into the top of my helmet, and I fell. When I got up I was only able to stagger forward by a couple of yards. A big, green and nearly naked man with a plasma rifle grabbed my arm and started pulling me in the right direction.

“Move it, Spaceman!” This was Knotts, looking almost fully recovered from his ordeal with the Roaches, except for his strange green skin.

Within a minute, the small bunch of us stumbled into the cave mouth.

This is all that was left, I thought, as I scanned the shadowy insides of the hill; seven rescued men and women, some of them now half awake and scared. Most of them were still unconscious or nearly so. Besides them were Brickwell, Dobson, Knotts and Strawberry.

“Where’s Dempsey?” I asked. “And Neelson?”

“Dempsey ran back out to the transports.” Knotts pointed. “No sign of Neelson.”

“Figures, huh?” The seated and panting Brickwell managed to chuckle. “They’re the two biggest chickens in the platoon.”

Resentfully, I felt like pointing out how Dempsey had helped me load and unload all the people we’d rescued, and how he’d shot down those two Roaches earlier.

Dobson’s voice blurted out. “Look! There he is!”

We all turned toward the transports, where sure enough, we could see Dempsey’s head peering out from between the first and second vessels. He ducked down, just as Roach heat beams started smashing into the frames of both transports.

“Somebody better cover me!” Dempsey sounded frantic over the radio. “You guys listening?”

“I guess the Roaches are already swarming in on us.” Knotts positioned himself on one end of the hill mouth. “You’d have thought an exploding transport would have given us a little more breathing room.”

“They just started a suicide charge.” Strawberry said, as he took the opposite side. “You know how those things go. The Roaches don’t stop until they’re all dead or dying, or we are.”

“I’ve got Roaches creeping in on the left.” Knotts said, glancing outside. When he leaned back in, he noticed the mess that had once been Mason. “Hey, Spaceman, would you mind getting me that grenade belt?”

Queasily, I pulled the item off what remained of the man’s lower torso and tossed it over.

Knotts pulled off a couple of grenades. “Somebody tell Dempsey what I’m up to.”

Dobson sent the message.

About a minute later, Knotts lobbed out a couple of grenades, one right after the other. As soon as the first blast was heard, Dempsey scurried out from between the transports, a full pack on his back and a black case in his grip. There was a tense moment when a Roach blast lifted Dempsey up and off the ground. Luckily, it hadn't hit the man directly but only the ground right in front of him.

Dobson joined Knotts at the edge of the cave. Between the two of them, they held the enemy back long enough for Dempsey to right himself and make it in with the rest of us.

Looking as white as a sheet, Dempsey found a clear spot and dropped the case he'd been carrying. Next, the Marine removed the backpack and let that drop as well. "That's Neelson's pack! That son-bitch just left it on the ground, along with his helmet and his rifle! Neelson left his freaking cammies too, back behind one of the transports! I think he stripped naked and went out to meet that fire! Didn't I tell all of you that guy was crazy?" He glanced around the interior of the hill. "Where's the old man?"

"He didn't make it." Strawberry said.

"What do you mean? I just heard him say he was all right!"

"That was before he blew up the transport, by standing right in front of it and shooting at it."

"What?" Dempsey cried out. "Renquist is immortal, man! Nothing can touch that guy! Nothing!"

The look on Strawberry's face told me he'd thought the very same thing previously.

"Roaches creeping in on the left." Knotts said. "They're darting back and forth, trying to look into the cave."

Strawberry crouched and poked his head out on the right. A second later, he jerked his head back in, just as a heat wave ripped out a chunk of hard dirt from the edge of the hill. He joked, "Looks like they're creeping in on the right, too."

"Let's get a grenade count." Knotts suggested.

"For what?" Dempsey queried. "There are still like a million Roaches out there! Even if they all bunched up for you, you still wouldn't be able to kill all of them with the grenades we have left! What we need is for Renquist to tell us what to do!"

"He's gone." Dobson reminded him.

"Renquist can't be gone! He can't be gone!" Dempsey's voice went down to a whimper. I could see he was crying now. "He can't be. He's fucking immortal."

Not even ten seconds later, the whine of a plasma rifle could be heard nearby. Everyone tensed up, but we were all still startled when the bedraggled form of Rubalcava flopped down from the top of the cave. With a dust-raising thud, he landed just outside the entrance.

"Friggin' last step…" Rube groaned in pain.

Knotts, green skin and all, was the first Marine to react. He reached out with a long brawny arm and grabbed Rube just past one boot. After a mighty heave, Knotts yanked the fallen man into the shadows with us. The ground where Rubalcava had landed suddenly burst and stung our faces with dirt and pebbles.

"I got knocked loopy up on top of the hill." Rube stammered out. "Half-buried under the dirt so the Roaches thought I was dead. My fucking radio broke. I thought I was the only one left,

until I heard you guys tossing out grenades. Did you guys see me making like a human dive bomber right now?"

"Renquist is dead." Dempsey informed the new arrival.

"What?" Rube asked.

Dempsey repeated the grim tidings.

"Renquist can't be dead! That man's a superhero!"

"I know." Dempsey said.

"Well, let's just do what we can, until we figure something out." Knotts tried to keep the despair from setting in on all of them. "Hey, Straw, let's push the Roaches back with a couple more grenades."

"We don't need them anymore." From his spot sitting on the ground, Brickwell pointed outside. "Take a look."

The entire group of conscious cave dwellers turned their heads that way. Huge towers of black smoke billowed into the sky, still dozens of miles away from the hill. They formed a dark and impenetrable blanket, as they culminated into one great and living torrent that rose up toward the highest reaches of the planet's atmosphere. One by one, the soldiers' gazes followed the incredibly tall spires of death down to the ground.

A great wall of flames, also writhing and swaying as if alive, spread forth like a virus. As far as the eye could see, the fire reigned supreme, climbing over mountains and stampeding over forests. All the while it maintained a steady, rapid speed as if it were being timed or directed. Whatever was left behind, no man could say, as whatever object or terrain encountered the fire was quickly snuffed from view by both flames and smoke.

"For crying out loud!" Dempsey shouted. "Why can't we ever get a break? Why do we always end up in shit like this?"

"Roach fodder or fried crispy." Strawberry muttered dryly, glancing at some of the others. "Not much of a choice there, huh?"

Knotts peeked out of the cave again. "I guess we can hold on to our grenades now, seeing as how the enemy is no longer anywhere in sight. Gee, I wonder why they didn't stick around?"

"Because they're smarter than us, you ape-shit!" Dempsey snapped out in frustration. "That's what we should be doing; getting the hell out of here!"

"It won't do us any good." Strawberry replied. "That fire's moving at a good fifty or sixty miles per hour. There is no way a human being is going to outrun that for long. Or a Roach for that matter."

"We can at least try!"

"And gain what? Twenty more minutes before the fire reaches us?"

"At least I'll be alive for twenty more minutes!" Dempsey argued out of desperation.

"If you want to make a run for it, the door's wide open for you." Brickwell said. "Nobody's going to stop you this time."

Dempsey lowered his head.

"Anyway, you won't even have that long." Brickwell went on. "I think that fire's moving a lot faster than sixty miles an hour. I'm guessing we have about ten minutes left."

"Maybe less." Knotts estimated.

“Grim Reaper’s comin’ with a flame-thrower.” Rube said, just before he grabbed at his bruised ribs. “Hey, Douglas, do you think that those pineapple chunks on the ground will heal me if I eat them?”

I shrugged. How the hell would I know?

“Doesn’t anybody have any ideas?” Dempsey asked.

“Yeah, I have an idea.” Brickwell requested. “Toss me Neelson’s backpack.”

Dempsey did.

The heftier man starter digging through it. He cracked a smile when he discovered a package of red licorice vines. “I knew that knucklehead had some poguey bait (candy) in here. You guys want some?” After taking a couple of strips, he tossed the package over to Strawberry.

“Does anybody have any real ideas?” Dempsey repeated. “Anybody?”

“We don’t have enough time to do anything.” I said.

“What about these frog people?” Dempsey pointed. “Maybe they can think of something! They’re smart. They were smart enough to set up the outpost, right?”

I looked into the faces of the people we’d rescued. Well, the few who were conscious, anyway. Their expressions were lifeless and numb, or just plain scared. “I don’t think they’re fully awake yet. I don’t think they’ll be able to help us.”

“We’ve gotta do something!” Dempsey screamed.

Strawberry was starting to look angry. “Look, I understand how you’re feeling. I didn’t want to end up like this either, boxed in by fucking Roaches on one side and giant fruits on the other. I think Renquist was a fool to send out that Non-Retrieval code! If he hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place!”

“Hey, hold on, man.” Rube countered. “It was either we go Non-Retrieval or we would have had another Betelren Six out here! And on top of that, you know how close the Roaches are to hopping on the Links!”

“I’m starting to feel the heat now, from the fire.” Knotts said, but nobody seemed to be paying attention.

“Why can’t you just admit that Renk made the wrong call?” Strawberry growled. “Why do you always have go around kissing Renk’s ass?”

“He made the right call!” Rube shouted back.

“Guys,” I tried to calm them both. “If these are our last few minutes, we shouldn’t spend them fighting with each other.”

“Why don’t you shut the hell up?” Strawberry looked ready to pounce on me. “Maybe if you’d done a better job steering your stupid transport, we wouldn’t have ended up in the middle of nowhere like we did!”

“So, it’s his fault the Roaches landed on Lesenia?” Rube shot back.

Unable to listen to any more of the argument, I decided to take a stroll. I thought to walk outside, but I didn’t want to take the risk of Strawberry taking a swing at me, so I went further into the cave instead.

As I stepped over the horizontal bodies of a few outpost personnel, I noticed that Dempsey had crawled back there as well. The timorous man had his flashlight on and sitting on the ground beside him. I could hear him fumbling around in the dark with something that sounded like hard plastic.

“What are you doing?” I asked, clearly startling him. I reached into the pocket where I’d stashed my own flashlight and shone it into Dempsey’s face.

“Somebody has to do something.” He said, avoiding the glare.

As I flashed the light down lower, I saw the case Dempsey brought back from the transports. It was a case full of LRR radio parts. He was busy putting together a Long Reach Radio.

“This thing won’t turn on. What am I missing?”

“The battery’s probably off.” I said, at once remembering Dempsey’s clumsiness and the exploding battery back at Message Hill. There was a possibility that Dempsey could manage to blow us all up before the fire reached us. “Here, let me finish it up for you.”

Sure enough, after I opened the seal I saw that the battery switch was still set to off. I clicked the battery on, resealed it properly and handed the radio back to Dempsey. In his haste, the itchy Marine turned the radio on and set it to a high volume. This resulted in a long squeak followed by a wall of static.

“What’s he got there?” Rube’s voice filtered over.

A moment later, a second flashlight beam illuminated Dempsey.

“A working LRR radio.” I answered.

“Won’t do us much good now.” Rube sighed. “I wish we’d had one of those when we first Pulsed onto this goddamned rock.” His flashlight wavered away. “Hey, guys, what’s the ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) on the blaze?”

“Two minutes and counting, until we’re all chicken tenders.” Brickwell replied.

“We’ve at least got to try, right?” Dempsey said, refusing to see the hopelessness in the situation. “I should go outside for better reception but I don’t want to get myself flash-fried.”

The little assistance I could provide was to point my flashlight at the radio’s digital tuner. I suppose I was as scared as Dempsey at that moment. Drops of sweat were now running freely down my forehead and a huge knot had formed in my stomach.

“What the hell good is a radio going to do us now?” Strawberry’s angry voice boomed back.

Dempsey looked up at me. “We’ve gotta at least try, right?”

“Yeah.” I said.

By the cave mouth, Knotts fired a few shots of plasma out at the horizon. “I guess that didn’t work. The fire is still coming.”

“Yeah, we’ve gotta at least try.” I nodded, wondering if that might be the last sentence I would ever say.

“One and a half minutes.” Brickwell called out. “Maybe less.”

Thick waves of heat began to ebb into the small cave. These seemed to intensify as they bounced along the walls and gathered together in the open space. I found myself drawing fast breaths. My head was quickly becoming muddled.

“Stupid radio.” Dempsey complained. “I can’t lock on to any coordinates. Whoever designed this thing, whoever put these circuits together like this, was an asshole! The scanner should have picked something up by now!”

Despite the situation, I found myself chuckling, but I had to cut this short when my head started to throb. A strong wave of dizziness came over me, bad enough that I had to reach out and place a hand against the wall to steady myself.

“Minus one minute and counting.” Brickwell said. All trace of hope was gone from his voice.

The circuits, I thought to myself in amusement. Whoever designed those circuits was an…

I stopped short, nearly realizing something important, becoming more than a little frustrated when the thought didn't stand still long enough for me to recognize it. Trying to find that lone revelation among the stifling waves of heat, I wiped at my forehead, inadvertently taking the flashlight's glare away from Dempsey. The light was shining in a small circle on my cammies and near my bicep, I noticed.

"Hey, I can't see anymore." Dempsey complained. "Bring the light back!"

With the beam, I followed the cammie blouse down to the crook of my elbow, past my forearm, and over to my scraped up wrist…

"Come on! We're running out of time!"

… and to my dirty fingertips resting heavily on the cave wall.

"I can't see anything!"

"Shut up, Dempsey." I said, staring at my fingertips under the glare of the flashlight. What was my brain trying to tell me?

"I can't see!"

"I said, shut the hell up!" I yelled, so loud it disrupted the arguments and the whining, and even Knotts' random shots outside.

Everything was silent except for the throbbing heat and our heavy breaths. As the growing steam began wringing tears from my eyes, Dempsey accidentally happened upon another burst of static.

"Shut that off, now!"

I could only imagine the bewildered look on the man's face as he complied, as I continued to stare at my glowing hand.

Then, it began to dawn on me. I wasn't just staring at my fingers, but at what lay behind them as well. I was looking through many thick layers of hardened mud and rock. Behind this natural wall was a sheet of unknown metal that had been buried there for countless centuries. With my mind, I was looking at insulated tubing, at self-repairing mechanisms, at a maze of connectors and leads. All of that had been made of materials and substances that hadn't even been imagined by human engineers yet. I almost giggled, as I recalled Dempsey's comment.

Whoever designed these circuits was an asshole!

Whoever designed the radio, maybe, but not the being responsible for the inner workings of the teleport-hill. Whoever designed that had designed it to last forever.

"Hey, don't take it personal, man." Dempsey was saying. Now, he sounded as if he'd given up as well. "We've got enough problems as it is. I was just trying to help."

I grinned like a madman. If only we had a Wehnteweisell pineapple around, perhaps we could persuade it to activate the teleport and seal us in from the fire. By the mere force of its will, it could save our lives. Who ever thought a pineapple could be sentient, anyway, like a human being?

A human being like me, I thought.

I became aware of some of the Marines' clothing, dried out so thoroughly by the unbearable temperatures that it was bursting into flames, while panicked voices were hurled in all directions.

These sounds I pushed aside, concentrating instead on those circuits that held the precious and powerful liquid metal on one side, liquid that had to breach across a tiny gap of space in

order to activate the closing of the teleport hill. What would it take to cause that liquid to make that tiny, yet monumental leap?

And suddenly, as I gagged on strangling smoke and squinted through tear-filled eyes, I was doing it, willing it to happen. The liquid metal stream started reaching across that bare fraction of space, setting the technology into motion and instantly bringing about a union of circuits where there had previously been none.

Amid the cries of pain and the chaos, my conscious mind wavered on the brink of oblivion. As I felt the darkness inside my head begin to surpass the darkness outside of it, I forced my brain to complete the process. I mentally screamed an order for the circuitry to engage my command.

Soldiers shouted near the cave entrance, their frantic forms appearing as fleeting shadows in a bright red furnace, even as the dirt began to ebb itself over the cave opening. The gaping mouth seemed to yawn and quickly, determinedly, it closed up just as the wall of flames began lapping its way inside.

Becoming nauseous and disoriented, I tried to keep my faltering eyes open, only to have them blink back at me defiantly. Then, my body lost control, lost its balance and collapsed like a rag doll to the ground. I bounced as heavily as a corpse would, and my head rolled to one side as if lifeless.

We survived the fire, of course.

I succeeded in activating the portal door and closed up the cave entrance. The Marines who weren't in flames helped put out those of us who were. They triggered some anti-biological warfare, air-purifying chemicals; they called these AB-Vacs, to suck out the smoke from the cave before it killed the bunch of us. (These came from Neelson's backpack, I might add. You don't know how much of a hero Dempsey was for having retrieved it.) The AB-Vacs left us with a thin yet breathable layer of oxygen, which could be replenished with diminishing returns as long as we had the AB-Vacs available. To preserve oxygen further, we all lay down on our backs, as we used less air this way than if we were all standing up and jabbering away all the time.

It took hours and hours for the waves of fire to pass over us. We counted either four or five waves altogether, as we heard their rumble and felt their heat through the packed dirt. Too many waves for a Unilink Transport with full Pulse Magnifiers to outrun, so it turned out to be a good decision not to try and Pulse around the planet.

One of the women we'd rescued passed away in there. The others feared that I'd take that same route myself, but somehow I managed to pull through. Maybe it was because of all those pineapples I'd brushed against during our stay on Lesenia, but I couldn't say for certain.

Once we were fairly sure that the fires were over, I tried to open the hill up with my mind. I couldn't do it. My best guess is that the repeated waves of intense fire and its terribly high temperatures had done what time and neglect had been unable to do. Those ancient circuits were either melted or in some way impaired. Engineers who later excavated the site were unable to figure out exactly what kinds of devices or structuring were buried into the hill, because they were so badly melted. They couldn't identify half the metals they dug out, either.

In the end, we had to dig ourselves out. It took a few days, seeing as how the outer shell of the hill had been hardened as tough as rock by the multiple furnaces that had rolled over us.

Insta-Shovels sometimes broke against the barrier. We ended up using them as spades, which let me tell you, weren't any picnic to use that way. Somehow, we managed to poke open a tiny air hole on a clear and chilly night.

I'm sure you can imagine what kind of celebrating took place inside the hill. We all took turns putting our lips up to that hole and sucked in air that was not as sweaty and grimy as what we'd been breathing ever since we'd been buried alive. It was cool, only somewhat refreshing because it was still so ashy outside. One of the outpost women was so happy she gave Dempsey a kiss. Her green coloring had started to fade by then. I have to say, that after flashing our lights at her mostly nude body for the better part of three days, she was starting to look pretty attractive to the rest of us as well.

We got the hole open wide enough to squeeze a man through. The first one to get out was Dempsey, because he'd been thoughtful enough to grab a radio before we'd been buried alive. Rubalcava escaped next, with his GPS tracker and his laminated coordinate sheet in hand. We had another party, once the satellite relayed the message that a transport was being sent out to pick us up.

Several transports came to Lesenia, as a matter of fact. They brought with them scores of biological experts, engineers and Explorer Drones. The drones scoured the planet to obtain new air and soil samples. The multiple Roach nests were discovered, now that the foliage around them had been burned away. So were the underground chambers where they'd been stockpiling their ores and minerals. The Roaches were all dead, just like the rest of the planet. The brass decided that Lesenia would no longer be a suitable place for an outpost, much less a recruit training and deployment station. It was estimated that the planet would remain inhospitable for many generations to come, if not centuries. In one fell swoop, the Wehnteweisell had succeeded in getting rid of both humanity and the Roaches from their world.

I'd chosen to stay behind, long after the surviving members of platoon Ten-Twenty and the personnel we'd rescued were gone. After some long and deep thinking, I found that I couldn't disagree with the Wehnteweisell's decision to destroy their planet. It was either the Roaches taking over or humanity, and in the end they chose neither. They did what they had to do to preserve their integrity. This meant they had to destroy the paradise they'd worked so many eons to create.

I suppose the pineapple people learned a lot from the clashes between humans and Roaches, like how to deceive, how to manipulate, how to subjugate, and worst of all, how to wage war. I really can't say we taught them anything good.

The Explorer Drones reported no signs of life anywhere on the entire planet. As everything began to wind down and the flock of Space Corps personnel began to slowly abandon Lesenia, I had a sudden thought. They were still there, the Wehnteweisell, way down in the depths of the planet with their herds of camel-horses, their little gibbon-like mammals, their insects and their bat-birds. And they were all waiting, some with the patience of moons, some with a lot less, until humanity was gone from the surface.

I couldn't even tell you how I know this, only that I sense it's the truth. When the Wehnteweisell opened my mind up, it stayed that way. It's funny because now I can catch random thoughts from people I talk to.

Of course, I didn't admit to anybody that the pineapple people were buried deep within the earth. Otherwise some high-handed military Jack might order huge drilling machines to Pulse to Lesenia and dig them out. Then the Wehnteweisell would be turned over to the biologists and these people would work very hard to pry open all their mental secrets, just like the Roaches had done already.

I've always said, it's better to live and let live. If the Wehnteweisell want their planet to be absent of humans and Roaches, then who's to say they're wrong?

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About Non-Retrieval

This novella is the mix of three major influences: the movies Starship Troopers directed by Paul Verhoeven, Aliens directed by James Cameron and the book on the American Civil War, The Red Badge Of Courage, written by Stephen Crane. These are all tales of heroism among Men, of military combat against menaces from outer space in the movies, and of the experiences of a young soldier facing war for the first time in the book. The bravado of Johnny Rico and his Roughnecks, the rapport and honor of the Colonial Marines in Aliens, and the innocence and coming of age of the youthful Private Henry were all incorporated into the story.

I first released this novella in September of 2010. It was the first e-book I ever presented to the public, where I introduced a vague branch of the military called the Space Marines, much like the generic soldiers in Starship Troopers, but with no real affiliation to any existing military organization. What happened was that a number of real Marines read this novella and criticized it for being inaccurate. Some of these Marines were very vocal in saying that I misrepresented what they stood for and how their organization worked.

It became a challenge for me to rewrite this story and make it better. I've never been a Marine, but I have been a Marine recruit, and I felt my characters were in line with real Marines that had been my Drill Instructors and with Marines I have known since that time. The characters in essence did not change all that much.

What did change was the military organization structured around them. I did my research this time. I watched popular movies and read popular fiction books based on the military, and on the sub-genre of military science fiction. I took bits and pieces from these stories for added color. Next, I dove into real history, watching documentaries or reading accounts of famous battles, reading the biographies of heroic Marines and studying the protocol, training and weaponry that Marines are using today. The new and improved version of my story had a much better reception than the original.

I didn't stop there, however. I wanted to make the story bigger than just this one novella, and I wanted to turn the original Sergeant Renquist into a character worthy of legend and epic battles. I read what Robert Heinlein and Robert Haldeman had done with the genre of military sci-fi, but I wasn't overly impressed with either of them. I came across the Empire Of Man series, by David Weber and John Ringo, and that's when I really got a jump-start. Heinlein wrote about bugs and nukes, Haldeman focused on the futility of war and time distortion, while Weber and Ringo concentrated on making a platoon of Space Marines march across an exotic planet. I didn't want to follow in any other writer's footsteps, however. I wanted to walk my own path.

The result was the creation of the Roaches In The Attic series. This series went in directions I hadn't anticipated when I first wrote Non-Retrieval. Certain things would have to be changed, updated, adapted, reverse-engineered, etcetera. I didn't want to simply layer over the original story and forget about it, because it was my first release and it marked a place in time where before that moment I had never published anything, and afterwards I had. This first novella, Non-Retrieval, would allow me to call myself an author. Sure, an unknown and amateur author, but an author nonetheless.

This novella came first, and that's why I've called it Roaches In The Attic 0. It's an easy story to read, the characters are likable and there is a lot of action in it, just like the movies that influenced me to write it. It also deals with the emotional impact and sudden maturity of the main character, similar to the metamorphosis that the young private goes through in Stephen Crane's book. That's what this story was meant to be when I first wrote it, an action adventure with growth and emotion from the main protagonist. A story that a reader could get some quick suspense and thrills from, that would satisfy the professional soldiers out there that I had adhered to their strict standards and that showed glimpses of complexity in the anthropological, scientific and science fiction areas. The series is vastly more complex than this, in terms that you wouldn't normally associate with the genre of military sci-fi, such as mythology and the metaphysical. It is a very big step from the novella to the series.

Non-Retrieval may have been a small step for me, but it was a crucial step. This is why I've preserved it in its original form before it matured into the multi-book series it has since become. It was a chore to write at first, as my forte is not at all science fiction. Now that I've gotten all of the kinks out of it, it really is a pleasure to revise and read this novella once again.

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About The Author

Raymond Towers is a 55 year old author from San Diego. A lifelong reader and aspiring writer, Raymond dedicated himself to pursuing a career in writing in September of 2010. Since that time, he has created over one hundred works of fiction, articles on writing and role-playing supplements. This includes writing over fifty novellas, novels or short story collections in the genres of dark fantasy, horror, science fiction and true paranormal events. Raymond's current project is a novel series with ambitions to combine multiple genres together, including ancient history and future science fiction.

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